The New Criterion

May 1995

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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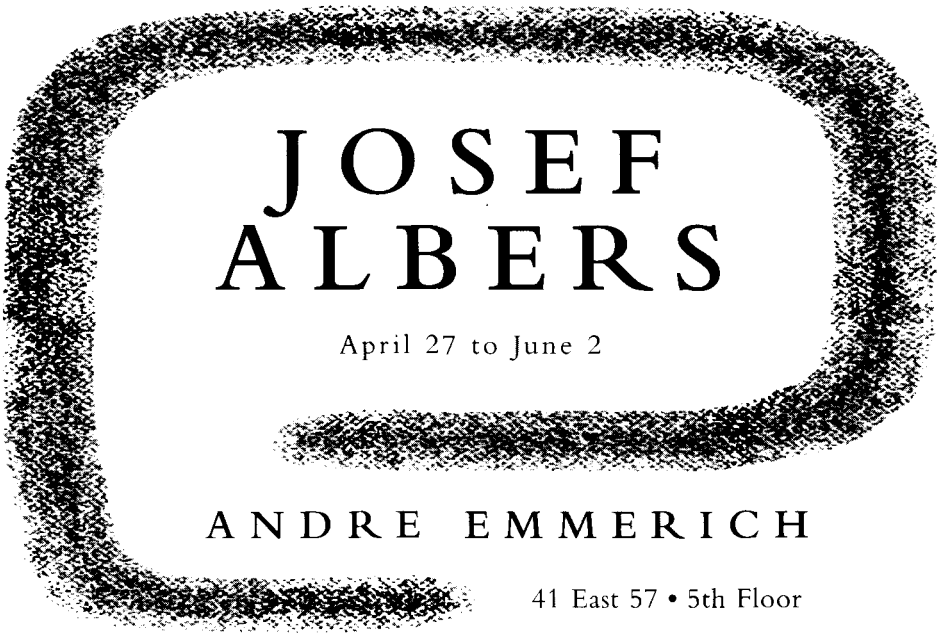

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The New Criterion *May 1995*

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Notes & Comments: May 1995

Revising the revisionists on American Communism

With the publication of *The Secret World of American Communism*—the initial volume in a new series of studies called "Annals of Communism," published by the Yale University Press under the editorship of Jonathan Brent—the history of the Communist movement in America has been definitively altered. This book is the first to give us an account of clandestine Communist activities in this country that is based on documents from the recently opened archives of the former Soviet Union. It is the work of two distinguished American scholars—Harvey Klehr of Emory University and John Earl Haynes of the Library of Congress—and a Russian archivist, Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov, who was formerly with the Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Recent History in Moscow.

What this book establishes beyond the shadow of a doubt is that the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) was, from the outset of its creation in the aftermath of the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia in 1917, an organization whose sole purpose was to serve the interests of the Soviet state by any means and for whatever ends—legal or illegal, public or secret—determined by the Party's masters in Moscow. It also establishes that the operations of the CPUSA were financed by sizable infusions of money secretly and often illegally channeled to the Party from the Soviet Union. It thus marks *finis* to whatever claims may have been advanced in the past—and there have been many, of course, and recently, too—that the CPUSA was somehow to be understood as a normal and independent American political party, notwithstanding its radical views.

The authors of *The Secret World of American Communism* write with admirable clarity about the issues their work has been obliged to engage:

> Many questions remain about the CPUSA's role in American political and social life. One of the most contentious and important issues concerns the party's clandestine activities. Did the Communist party conceal key aspects of its organization in a secret apparatus? Did secret members of the party infiltrate government agencies in the 1930s and 1940s? Did the Communist party and its members commit espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union? Strictly speaking, only the last was a crime. The maintenance of a concealed underground organization, however, marked the CPUSA as an abnormal participant in democratic politics. And the manipulation of government agencies to promote Communist policies was a form of political subversion.

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They write with clarity and candor, too, about the historiographic debate their study is designed to address:

> Two views of the history of the CPUSA are in contention. The older view, first developed in the 1950s, holds that the CPUSA was never an independent American political party but a creature given life and meaning by its umbilical ties to the Soviet Union. Seeing the Soviet connections as the defining aspect of American communism, these scholars . . . focus on the party's willingness to alter its policies to suit Soviet needs and on the key roles played by the party leadership in defining the Stalinist nature of American communism.
>
> The revisionist view, the dominant perspective among academic historians for the past twenty years, holds that the American Communist movement was a normal, albeit radical, political participant in American democracy. This assessment sees American communism as a domestic American movement with its roots in America's democratic, populist, and revolutionary past.

About the conclusions which the authors of *The Secret World of American Communism* have reached on the basis of their research in the Comintern archives, they are appropriately unambiguous:

> It is no longer possible to maintain that the Soviet Union did not fund the American party, that the CPUSA did not maintain a covert apparatus, and that the key leaders and cadres were innocent of connection with Soviet espionage operations. . . . Both the Soviet Union and the American Communist leadership regarded these activities as normal and proper. Their only concern was that they not become public.

In other words, what the authors correctly characterize as "the dominant perspective among academic historians for the past twenty years" on the Communist movement in America has proved to be an ideological fantasy. The bulk of the research that is documented in *The Secret World of American Communism* fully supports this claim with an extraordinary range of dramatic revelations.

Document 1, for example, is a Comintern accounting sheet listing payments to Americans in 1919 and 1920 amounting to the equivalent of almost three million dollars, an immense fortune at the time, with more than a million of it going to John Reed, the author of *Ten Days That Shook the World*.

Documents 2, 3, and 4, from the years 1923–25, are concerned with the activities of Armand Hammer and his father, Julius, both American physicians and businessmen resident in Moscow at the time. (Armand Hammer was later well known in the United States as the head of Occidental Petroleum and an art collector on a big scale.) The authors write that "Comintern records establish for the first time that in the early years of the Soviet regime, Armand and his father were actually an official part of the Comintern's covert financial network," and, further, that "Documents 3 and 4 disclose for the first time that both Julius and Armand Hammer were laundering Soviet money"—that is, providing a channel for Comintern funds to be paid to Communist operatives abroad.

The documentation detailing the Moscow-directed activities of the CPUSA in the 1930s and 1940s is even more plentiful. There is much in *The Secret World*, for example, about J. Peters, who was identified by Whittaker Chambers as heading the CPUSA's underground organization in the 1930s. The documents assembled in this book confirm, as the authors write, that "Chambers's allegations concerning J. Peters and the Communist underground in Washington, D.C., in the 1930s were true."

Then, too, there is a good deal about the curious links that formed what was, in effect, a Communist underground, more or less supervised by the NKVD in Moscow and the CPUSA in New York, that spread from the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish

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Civil War to the Office of Strategic Services and the Office of War Information in Washington during the Second World War. This chilling story, all of it meticulously documented in *The Secret World*, is another of the extraordinary revelations to be found in this important study.

Whether, in today's intellectual climate, these and the other disclosures contained in *The Secret World of American Communism* will prove to be sufficient to reverse "the dominant perspective among academic historians for the past twenty years" on the subject of the Communist movement in America remains to be seen. For this "dominant perspective" has been based more on ideology than on an interest in knowing the truth. But for anyone interested in the truth, this first volume in Yale's "Annals of Communism" series marks the beginning of a triumphant revision of the revisionists.

A further note on "Camp"

To name a sensibility, to draw its contours and to recount its history, requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion.
—Susan Sontag, in "Notes on Camp" (1964)

Just in case you were wondering what has happened to the discussion of Camp in the age of political correctness, more than thirty years after Susan Sontag published her famous "Notes" on the subject, consider the following passage from K. Robert Schwarz's article in the April issue of *Opera News*, a publication of the Metropolitan Opera Guild. Mr. Schwarz's topic is the critical response to *The Ghosts of Versailles*, composed by John Corigliano, with a libretto by William M. Hoffman, which had its world première at the Met in 1991:

> Those who criticized *Ghosts* sometimes employed a peculiar vocabulary, one not often encountered in classical-music reviews. Edward Rothstein wrote of the opera's "camp" humor and "perversely campy villain"; Bernard Holland accused the creators of "dressing the twentieth century in Mozartian drag"; Peter G. Davis denounced the "irritatingly camp Rossini finale." Considering that both Corigliano and Hoffman are openly gay, might these words amount to coded references?
>
> Hoffman's reply is unequivocal: "Calling it campy is homophobic, absolutely. When they're saying there's camp in *Ghosts*, what they're really saying is it's gay. The same people who talked about camp values in *Ghosts* would never use the word when talking about Mozart or Rossini—and I can't think of anything campier than *L'Italiana in Algeri*. Why is it permissible for Rossini and not for us? Because knowing of the sexual orientation of the artists, they feel they can apply values to us that they don't dare apply to Rossini or Mozart."

Thus in the age of political correctness it is deemed permissible for artists who are "openly gay" to characterize—or, indeed, mischaracterize—Mozart and Rossini as "camp" while it is forbidden for critics of *Ghosts* to describe that work in similar terms. "Calling [*Ghosts*] campy is homophobic, absolutely," says Mr. Hoffman, putting the critics on notice that the language police now enjoy the support of the Metropolitan Opera Guild.

The greatest show on earth?

Lisa Schiffren writes: After making a big splash parading its magnificent elephants across Capitol Hill, tempting all too many lawmakers of both parties to compare Congress to the circus, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus—the Greatest Show on Earth—came to New York with its 125th-anniversary show. You might have thought that the circus would be one institution immune from the imperatives of political correctness and multiculturalism. Unfor-

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tunately, Ringling Bros. prove that this is not so. This year's theme for the classic, all-American circus was built around a rap song called "Groovin' in the Urban Jungle." Perhaps this seemed relevant, or even exciting, when management thought about crowds in the heartland. But New Yorkers, and most Americans who live in or near cities, regard structured entertainment as a diversion from the realities of life in the urban jungle.

The central "urban" element of the circus was a troop of black and Hispanic acrobats, called the Chicago Kids, who bounced on trampolines to rap music, and seemed for all the world like an authentic urban gang that had been temporarily tamed—or, like those Chicago gang members who recently ran for political office, had realized that their street skills can be marketable. Remember when the half-time parade of performers featured plenty of pretty girls riding horses, and innumerable clowns pouring out of tiny cars? Well, this half-time parade featured performers simulating a motorcycle gang, and urban-youth acrobats marching with boom-boxes. The stately elephants seemed a bit out of place here, like great gothic monuments among cheesy glass office buildings.

For that matter, the acts that are the heart of the traditional circus—the high-wire acrobats and the lion tamer locked in a cage with a dozen powerful beasts—seemed to have lost all power to thrill. For one thing, the amazing, flying Whosis brother actually muffed the world-famous triple somersault, landed in the net, and bounced back, all without so much as a small flicker of embarrassment. And then the much trumpeted Gunther Gebel-Williams, a Fabio look-alike who is billed as the world's greatest lion tamer, did little more than make his tigers —no lions—roll over and jump once or twice. Would that it weren't so, but this just doesn't hold up next to motorcyclists defying gravity by circling and crisscrossing one another, in the dark, inside a gigantic steel ball—clearly *the* crowd-pleaser of the day.

Speaking of animals, perhaps one reason they're now so small a part of the circus is the omnipresent threat of action by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. The group I was with, mostly executives of a firm that does financial work for Ringling Bros., had been promised a backstage tour before the show. This treat was canceled because, we were told, PETA had been infiltrating such tours, taking pictures and causing disturbances. This despite the fact that circus animals appear to be healthier and glossier than the mangy, torpid beasts in most zoo cages.

On balance, the greatest show on earth was more like a stadium-rock-concert spectacle for toddlers than a traditional circus. Indeed, the most popular souvenir was not the stuffed tigers or the pink plastic elephants, but rather the multi-colored neon lights on sticks for children to wave, as if at a rock concert, once the lights had gone down. Perhaps that's why the audience was singularly lacking in yuppie parents. Instead it was composed almost entirely of working-class families, white and minority, from the suburbs and the outer boroughs, and non-English-speaking immigrants from Asia and Latin America, with several generations in tow.

Perhaps it is redundant to criticize the circus for vulgarity, but surely Ringling Bros. would attract the same "multicultural" audience without pandering to street culture. Or maybe, up against professional sports, the wonders of technology and TV animation, and the thrills of the real urban jungle, highly disciplined acrobats and animals don't cut it anymore.

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The Edmund Wilson centenary

by Hilton Kramer

HENRY BRANDON: *When you write about literature, do politics influence your selection?*

EDMUND WILSON: *No. There are certain kinds of writers that are more congenial to me than others. . . .*

HENRY BRANDON: *What do you think of the standards of literary criticism today?*

EDMUND WILSON: *I don't think about those things AT ALL! Literary criticism is a department of literature for me, and when I read literary critics I read them as literature; the others I can't read at all. I never think of myself, for instance, as a literary critic; I think of myself simply as a writer and a journalist. I write about things that interest me. . . .*

—from *Conversations with Henry Brandon*, 1968

On the occasion of the centenary of the birth of Edmund Wilson (1895–1972), Jeffrey Meyers has written the first full-length biography of this remarkable writer.[1] It doesn't come a moment too soon. If Wilson wasn't the greatest literary critic of his time—a distinction that, in my view, belongs to T. S. Eliot—he was certainly the only American critic whose work can be usefully compared to that of the leading novelists and poets of his own generation. Yet, barely a quarter of a century after his death, Wilson's books are largely unread and the man himself looks more and more like the figure of a distant era. The literary tradition that nurtured him and his readers is in disarray. The literary vocation to which he dedicated his long career had already become an endangered endeavor long before he quit the scene, and in the years since his passing literature itself has suffered a loss of status in American cultural life that would have been impossible to imagine in the heyday of his influence. It is not only that Wilson has had no successors. The world in which he prospered has passed into history, and what has supplanted it is a degraded, highly politicized literary culture guaranteed to misconstrue his accomplishment and misrepresent its virtues.

As I write, for example, there is in progress in New York City a series of programs marking the Wilson centenary under the rubric of "The Last of the Public Intellectuals." This is a grotesquely inappropriate way to characterize Wilson's achievement, which was primarily that of a man of letters. The term "public intellectual" is a recent coinage of the academic Left designed to subordinate literature to the interests of politics and the adumbration of social policy. It thus gives priority to what is the least persuasive and most perishable aspect of Wilson's literary corpus—his penchant for indulging in leftist clichés and other crackpot political ideas—while at the same time relegating his principal accomplishment, and indeed the very nature of his talent, to an entirely secondary status. This may seem an odd way to celebrate the life and work of a

1 *Edmund Wilson: A Biography*, by Jeffrey Meyers; A Peter Davison Book / Houghton Mifflin, 554 pages, $35.

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writer who devoted his talents to the art of literature, but it is entirely in keeping with the current academic practice of making politics a test of literary merit. For the academic Left today, the very concept of the man of letters is looked upon as contemptible.

As Mr. Meyers correctly reminds us in the preface to *Edmund Wilson: A Biography*, this happens to be an approach to literature that Wilson himself explicitly condemned in the course of his own career.

> If Wilson is somewhat out of fashion today [Mr. Meyers writes], it is only because the impressive intellect, knowledge and humane insight that illuminate his books have been lost through the onslaught of rigid ideological conformity, which he opposed throughout his life. As he prophetically wrote in *The Nation* in January 1938: "The young . . . are today not enthusiastic . . . about books: they merely approve when the book suits their politics. . . . I think it is a pity that they do not learn to read for pleasure. They may presently find that an acquaintance with the great works of art and thought is their only real assurance against the increasing barbarism of our time."

It is one of the many virtues of Mr. Meyers's book that it recalls us to the centrality of Wilson's literary interests and reminds us of the nature of those interests. For Wilson belonged to a tradition—he may have been its last major representative in America—for which history was itself a branch of literature; and literature, though not finally reducible to the historical conditions in which it is created, nonetheless remained a key to the understanding of history. It was in this respect that Wilson belonged as much to the line of historians like Michelet, Renan, and Taine as to that of a writer like Flaubert—the Flaubert, as Wilson reminded his readers in *The Triple Thinkers*, who wrote to Michelet that "you are certainly the French author whom I have read and reread most." Wilson's own way of dealing with the sometimes conflicting imperatives of history, with its tendency to reduce art to a subordinate status, and those of art itself, which its more militant exponents wish to extricate from history altogether, may be gleaned, I think, in the passage he quotes from the letter in which Flaubert criticized Taine's *History of English Literature*:

> There is something else in art beside the milieu in which it is practiced and the physiological antecedents of the worker. On this system you can explain the series, the group, but never the individuality, the special fact which makes him this person and not another. This method results inevitably in leaving *talent* out of consideration. The masterpiece has no longer any significance except as an historical document. . . . People used to believe that literature was an altogether personal thing and that books fell out of the sky like meteors. Today they deny that the will and the absolute have any reality at all. The truth, I believe, lies between the two extremes.

Wilson did not entirely agree with Flaubert's assessment of Taine. In his essay on "The Historical Interpretation of Literature," Wilson wrote that "the truth was that Taine loved literature for its own sake—he was at his best himself a brilliant artist"—the kind of artist that Wilson himself aspired to be. And it was precisely "between the two extremes" cited by Flaubert that Wilson usually produced *his* best work—including the essay on "The Politics of Flaubert" in *The Triple Thinkers*.

As for Wilson's own politics, I think Mr. Meyers has done more to clarify the origin of his essential outlook on "public" issues than any other writer who has addressed the subject. Wilson is commonly thought to have been radicalized by the Marxist movement in the 1930s—a current of political thought and political action in which he did indeed, for a time, become deeply engaged. It is another of the virtues of Mr. Meyers's book, however, that it establishes Wilson's war experience in France in the First World War as the crucible in which all his subse-

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quent attitudes toward society and governmental authority had their moral origin. Nowhere else have I seen Wilson so definitively identified as one of the "men of 1914," as they have been called—the generation that emerged from the slaughter of the war with its outlook on life permanently altered, the generation that made "a separate peace" with society itself as a direct result of the war.

Wilson was not involved in actual military combat himself. He served behind the lines assisting in the care of its casualties, and that was nightmare enough. Mr. Meyers writes:

> In July 1918, the first mass of wounded Americans poured in after the major battle at Château-Thierry and included many cases of syphilis and shell-shock. Wilson spent a month dressing the raw burnt skin of the screaming victims of mustard-gas. He recalled that "their penises were spongy and raw and swollen to enormous size, and bandaging and unbandaging them was extremely painful. There was one doctor, known for his sadism—he liked to kick the enlisted men—who would rip the bandages off. . . . One patient had three-quarters of the surface of his body burned and his lungs partially destroyed."
>
> The hospital was permeated with the stench of rotten flesh and the death-rate was appallingly high.

As Wilson recalled in *The American Jitters*:

> I swore to myself that when the War was over I should stand outside society altogether. I should do without the comforts and amenities of the conventional world entirely, and I should devote myself to the great human interests which transcend standards of living and conventions: Literature, History, the Creation of Beauty, the Discovery of Truth.

To which Mr. Meyers adds: "Though he cared little about money and lived very modestly for years, [Wilson] could never have pursued his literary goals by standing outside society." What "outside society" meant, in Wilson's case, was a place well beyond the reach of the kind of well-heeled bourgeois proprieties in which he had been brought up, an only child, by his neurotic father and his uncomprehending mother. "The war," Mr. Meyers writes, "cut him off . . . from his conventional upper-middle-class existence, which he had always assumed he would follow." And further:

> More importantly, his war experience transformed [Wilson] into a lifelong pacifist. It provided the ethical basis not only for his sympathy with the defeated South in the Civil War, but also for his opposition to America's foreign policy: the participation in World War Two, the Cold War ideology that justified vast military spending and the disastrous involvement in the war in Vietnam.

I think this puts Wilson's political thought—if it can be called that—at a higher level of ethical reflection than its historical simplifications and moral insensibility can be made to bear. After all, even Wilson's admirers on the political Left shuddered—some publicly but many more privately—over the obtuseness of the political analysis that made his introduction to *Patriotic Gore* such an embarrassment. This was the key passage, written in November 1961:

> I think that it is a serious deficiency on the part of historians and political writers that they so rarely interest themselves in biological and zoölogical phenomena. In a recent Walt Disney film showing life at the bottom of the sea, a primitive organism called a sea slug is seen gobbling up smaller organisms through a large orifice at one end of its body; confronted with another sea slug of an only slightly lesser size, it ingurgitates that, too. Now, the wars fought by human beings are stimulated as a rule primarily by the same instincts as the voracity of the sea slug. It is true that among the animals other than man it is hard to find organized aggression of the kind that has been developed by humanity. . . . The difference in this respect between man and the other forms of life is that man has succeeded in cultivating enough of what he calls "morality" and "reason" to justify

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> what he is doing in terms of what he calls "virtue" and "civilization."

Which is itself fairly primitive as a political theory. (Fortunately, the book proved to be far better than its introduction.) But I believe that Mr. Meyers is essentially correct in tracing Wilson's basic political attitudes—the pacifist clichés included—to his war experience in France.

Like many other writers of his generation who were similarly moved by the war to reject bourgeois society, Wilson proved unable to bring the same powers of skepticism and disbelief to the myths of the Revolution when they first loomed in the Depression era. But his romance with the Revolution was shorter-lived than that of many of his literary contemporaries in the 1930s, and his nose for Stalinist cant soon separated him from true believers like Malcolm Cowley. Finally, however, Wilson had no talent for politics. The introduction to *Patriotic Gore* is, in this respect, a confession of his abiding incomprehension of the political life of his time.

Wilson famously wrote about an amazing variety of subjects and cultures, yet when we go back over his work it seems to me that almost all of his best writing was devoted to the prose literature and the intellectual history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I am not in a position to judge the merits of *The Scrolls from the Dead Sea*; and about poetry—except for certain things in *Axel's Castle* and the essay on Auden—I find Wilson's criticism unpersuasive. He needed a subject about which he could tell a story, and he was a better storyteller in his critical and historical writing than in his attempts at fiction. Thus his best writing was, as he intended it to be, essentially narrative writing about people, events, and ideas. This is what gave his criticism its immense appeal to his readers, at least until the late 1960s, when—it is my impression—he was no longer read with the same avidity. After that, the number of readers who could enthusiastically respond to the kind of priority which Wilson gave literature and learning in his writing began to dwindle. In my own student days in the late 1940s and early 1950s, you could be pretty sure that everyone with an interest in writing would have read Wilson's weekly article in *The New Yorker* by the time they turned up at parties on the weekend. (In those days, the magazine came out on Thursdays.) When I was teaching at Yale in the mid-1970s, however, the only thing I could be sure my students had read every week was Pauline Kael's movie column in *The New Yorker*. The world had changed, and literature could no longer be counted on to command the same allegiance. We had entered the era of "good trash," as it was sometimes called, and the "new sensibility." One consequence of this change was that Wilson's trade publishers allowed some of his best books—*The Triple Thinkers*, *The Wound and the Bow*, and *The Shores of Light*—to go out of print. When these books were reprinted in the 1980s, they were issued by the Northeastern University Press—a tacit acknowledgment that they were not expected to have a significant readership.

Wilson always insisted that he was, first and last, "a writer and a journalist," which is a very different thing from a "public intellectual." His principal models, as Mr. Meyers reminds us, "were Edgar Poe, Hippolyte Taine, George Saintsbury, Van Wyck Brooks, and H. L. Mencken." With the exception of Poe, these are writers who are now very little read by serious students of literature, and even Poe is very little read as a critic.

It is depressing to think that Wilson may now be fated for a similar obscurity, but the chances of his escaping it do not look good. The attempt made by the very academic Lewis Dabney a few years ago to produce a *Portable Edmund Wilson* did nothing to revive an interest in Wilson as a writer. It had the character of a mausoleum to be visited on ceremonial occasions—than which, of course, there is no better way to seal a writer's fate. The book set out to satisfy too many interests, and its refusal—or was it only an inability?—to distinguish between

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what might be of enduring interest in Wilson's *oeuvre* and what has already proved to be perishable made the book a poor introduction for readers coming to Wilson for the first time. It simply packaged Wilson for classroom consumption, which, given today's academic atmosphere, itself amounts to a death sentence.

Nor have the early responses to Mr. Meyers's biography been any more encouraging. I was particularly appalled to see in Elizabeth Hardwick's review in *The New Yorker* that Wilson's diaries were said to be "among his principal achievements." I very much doubt that this mistaken judgment was intended by Elizabeth Hardwick to add another nail in the coffin of Wilson's reputation as a literary critic, but that was inevitably its effect. So is the notion that Wilson's "greatest subject" was "his own life." Are we really being invited to believe that Wilson's diaristic accounts of the societies he frequented on Cape Cod and in upstate New York—or even on his European travels—are more important than, say, the essays and portraits he devoted to Joyce or Hemingway or Fitzgerald, to John Jay Chapman, Christian Gauss, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, or Ulysses S. Grant? This seems to me a strange way to pay tribute to Wilson's accomplishments. I, certainly, would rather reread him on Flaubert and Michelet and Dickens—even on Harriet Beecher Stowe—and on the literary battles of the 1930s, than to endure once again the deadly chronicles of Wilson's compulsive sex life, which in the later diaries are rendered in a manner that is not significantly different from the dreary accounts of his visits to the dentist and the late-night drinking bouts. There are, to be sure, some very affecting *literary* moments in the late diaries—his account, for example, of what it meant for him to reread Macauley's *History of England* as his own life and work were drawing to a close. But even these remain isolated episodes, and leave us wishing that Wilson had lived long enough to devote full-scale essays to their subjects.

On the subject of Wilson's sex life, Mr. Meyers again puts the matter exactly right when he observes that "for Wilson, as for Pepys and Boswell, no seduction was complete until he had recorded its details in his diary." Yet I doubt if even Elizabeth Hardwick would want to claim that Wilson's diaries are in a class with either Pepys's or Boswell's. Wilson's life, apart from his writing and the intellectual labor that went into it, just wasn't that interesting. "He defined his own cyclical behavior," Mr. Meyers writes, "as dedicated toil followed by an orgy," and the details of the "orgy," or seductions, that he was concerned to record were often remarkably unappetizing. With his customary powers of application, Mr. Meyers has researched Wilson's half-century of sexual activity—from his loss of virginity in the arms of Edna St. Vincent Millay at the age of twenty-five to his drunken encounter with Penelope Gilliatt at the Princeton Club at the age of seventy-five—with a thoroughness that leaves little to the imagination. Mr. Meyers is not without a sense of humor in recounting this chronicle of Wilson's transformation from the "man in the iron necktie," as E. E. Cummings once described him, "into one of the great literary fornicators of all time," but it is a story that was often far less amusing for those who were nearest and dearest to Wilson himself. For anyone who knows what a sodden wreck Penelope Gilliatt had become when she succumbed to Wilson's charms in his old age, the story isn't really amusing at all—it is sordid. And what Elena Wilson—his fourth wife and the only one he seems to have loved very deeply—was obliged to endure on this score isn't a pretty story, either. It is no wonder that in the immediate aftermath of Wilson's death in the summer of 1972, Elena Wilson's first thought was: "Where are the diaries? Where are the diaries?" She had plenty to be apprehensive about.

Wilson's career as a fornicator, like his forays into politics, will in the end contribute nothing to secure his literary reputation. About Wilson's life, it seems to me that Mr. Meyers has now said everything that is of

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any conceivable interest for us to know, and more at times than we need to know. He has done particularly good work in correcting the record of Wilson's embattled marriage to Mary McCarthy—a story that McCarthy herself shamelessly lied about in the self-serving autobiographical sketches she wrote in the last years of her life, and which her most recent biographer, Carol Brightman, proved to be remarkably credulous about. [2] Yet biography—especially as biography is now written—tends not to serve as an inducement for its readers to turn from the life of a writer to his work. It may even serve as a substitute for an experience of the work itself. If this is what happens in Wilson's case, it would be indeed an irony, for it was a large part of his success as a writer that he used the biographical portrait as a means of recalling his readers to a writer's merits as well as to his place in history.

That was certainly one of the sources of the influence he exerted on my own career as a writer. When I was a student, it had become very much a fashion in the highbrow literary world to dismiss Wilson as a superficial critic, a mere popularizer or journalist. In *Partisan Review*, Delmore Schwartz had written an attack on his work, and then Stanley Edgar Hyman launched an even more vicious assault on Wilson in *The Armed Vision*. What I soon discovered, however, when I began to frequent the literary milieu in which these attacks had occurred, was that Wilson was actually more admired than these attacks suggested, and that the attacks themselves were more expressions of envy than of disinterested criticism designed to serve some higher literary purpose. It was Lionel Trilling who, in 1952, broke the ice that had pretty much sealed off Wilson's reputation from prospering in the literary quarterlies when, on the occasion of the publication of *The Shores of Light*, he spoke with admirable candor about what Wilson's example had meant in his own case. When I decided against an academic career, moreover, it was precisely Wilson's career as an intellectual journalist that served me as a model of what might be possible. Now, more than forty years later, the old condescending attacks on Wilson are forgotten, and Wilson's own writings are in danger of being forgotten, and even a writer as intelligent as Elizabeth Hardwick can seriously suggest that his life was his "greatest subject." I hope that Jeffrey Meyers's biography might do something to reverse the momentum of this loss—a loss in our collective cultural memory—but the signs, as I say, are not promising that it will. For the effect of this biography—so far, anyway—has been to turn the writer into a "character," whose contributions to literature and history are now of secondary interest.

2 See my article "Mary McCarthy & Company," in *The New Criterion* for January 1993.

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Art vs. aestheticism: the case of Walter Pater

by Roger Kimball

In an age when the lives of artists were full of adventure, his life is almost colourless.
—Walter Pater, "Sandro Botticelli"

If we had not welcomed the arts and invented this kind of cult of the untrue, then the realization of general untruth and mendaciousness that now comes to us through science—the realization that delusion and error are conditions of human knowledge and sensation—would be utterly unbearable. Honesty *would lead us to nausea and suicide. But now there is a counterforce against our honesty that helps us avoid such consequences: art as the* good *will to appearance.*
—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

For most of us, the Victorian essayist Walter Pater survives chiefly as a kind of literary aroma punctuated by a handful of famous phrases. Having grown up with the astringent qualms of modernism—which ostentatiously defined itself in opposition to the earnest aestheticism of writers such as Pater—we are likely to find that aroma a bit cloying. Few serious modern writers indulged themselves in prose so effulgently purple as did Pater. His meticulous adumbrations of mortal things quickened into beauty by death will strike most contemporary readers as quaint, neurasthenic, or both. Perhaps the notion that "*All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music*," as Pater wrote in "The School of Giorgione," is sufficiently abstract and elusive still to occasion productive meditation. But the idea—another of Pater's nuggets—that Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* "is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave" seems little more than a set-piece of timid *fin-de-siècle* morbidity. Even the celebrated apothegm from the conclusion of *The Renaissance*, Pater's first and most famous book, is troublesome: "To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life"—maybe, but for most of us the scintillations will long ago have been quenched by too-frequent repetition.

It is a matter of some curiosity, then, that the well-known literary critic Denis Donoghue should have undertaken a critical biography of Walter Pater.[1] Although he has written on a wide range of topics and figures, including Swift, Emily Dickinson, and the critic R. P. Blackmur, Mr. Donoghue is familiar to most of his readers as a champion of high modernism and its decidedly un-Pateresque ambitions.

At least, we might have thought them un-Pateresque. It is part of Mr. Donoghue's purpose in this book to restore Pater to his place as an important, though largely unacknowledged, precursor of modernism. "Pater," he writes, "gave modern literature its first act. The major writers achieved their

1 *Walter Pater: Lover of Strange Souls*, by Denis Donoghue; Knopf, 361 pages, $27.50.

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second and third acts by dissenting from him and from their first selves." It is not, Mr. Donoghue thinks, so much a question of "influence" as of "presence." He sets out to show that Pater is "a shade or trace in virtually every writer of significance from Hopkins and Wilde to Ashbery."

In addition to those just named, his roster of Pater's literary heirs includes James, Yeats, Pound, Ford, Woolf, Joyce, Eliot, Aiken, Hart Crane, Fitzgerald, Forster, Borges, Stevens, and A. R. Ammons. The first "poem" in Yeats's eccentric edition of the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) is a versified snippet from Pater's expostulation on the *Mona Lisa*. The mature T. S. Eliot would take sharp exception to Pater and everything he stood for; indeed, his essay "Arnold and Pater," from 1930, is a *locus classicus* in modernism's attack on Victorian aestheticism; but early works such as "Preludes," "Portrait of a Lady," and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* are instinct with a Pateresque languor, brimming as they are with personages measuring out lives with coffee spoons while they come and go talking of Michelangelo.

Similarly, the early Stevens is full of Pateresque themes and aspirations. Pater certainly does not hold the copyright on the idea (as Stevens put it in "Sunday Morning") that "death is the mother of beauty." But taken in conjunction with complacent peignoirs, late coffee and oranges, and "the holy hush of ancient sacrifice," the identification of mortality as the condition of beauty assumes a distinctly Pateresque coloring. Again, Pater was hardly the first to favor evocation over declaration; but his *style* of embracing intimation echoes plainly in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird":

> I do not know which to prefer,
> The beauty of inflections
> Or the beauty of innuendoes,
> The blackbird whistling
> Or just after.

If Mr. Donoghue is right, Pater's presence is more than a collection of echoes and insinuations. "Whatever we mean by modernity," he insists, Pater "is an irrefutable part of it." His first published essay, on Coleridge, in 1866 sounds the distinctive, disabused note: "Modern thought is distinguished from ancient by its cultivation of the 'relative' spirit in place of the 'absolute.' . . . To the modern spirit nothing is, or can be rightly known, except relatively and under certain conditions." Then, too, Pater's interest in French literature and German aesthetics helped to make English literature more cosmopolitan, more worldly. And the French element, especially, opened up exotic new avenues of feeling. In brief, Pater instigated for English letters something like what such writers as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Huysmans, and Mallarmé did for the French. He made the forbidden, the outlandish, the silent a central literary preoccupation—though he did so quietly, with the greatest possible tact. If he was a "lover of strange souls" (Mr. Donoghue's subtitle comes from Pater's essay on Leonardo in *The Renaissance*), if "strangeness and beauty" was his "favorite conjunction," it was for him a matter of discriminating delectation not abandonment. In this respect, he betrays a kinship with Mallarmé, who advocated painting "not the thing itself, but the effect that it produces," and who once defined poetry as "a brief tearing of silence." Pater's route to exquisiteness was not through absinthe, hashish, sexual extravagance, or conscious blasphemy, but via a diffident voraciousness of appreciation.

Nevertheless, despite Pater's enormous reserve, there is a direct line of descent from *The Renaissance* (which was first published in 1873) to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and other such turn-of-the-century manifestations of arty decadence. Mario Praz was right (in *The Romantic Agony*, his classic study of the literature of decadence) to identify Pater as "the forerunner of the Decadent Movement in England." Not for nothing did Pater expatiate on the "fascination of corruption" and the poetic aspects of a countenance tinged with a deathly pallor. Algernon Swinburne was not only a friend

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but also a spiritual brother. Especially in his early years, Pater liked to think of himself as a champion of pagan virtues. But an underside of pagan vices clings firmly to Pater's prose. G. K. Chesterton perceptively noted the duality that accompanies the championship of paganism: "A man loves Nature in the morning for her innocence and amiability, and at nightfall, if he is loving her still, it is for her darkness and her cruelty. He washes at dawn in clear water as did the Wise Men of the Stoics, yet, somehow at the dark end of the day, he is bathing in hot bull's blood, as did Julian the Apostate."

Mr. Donoghue duly registers this aspect of Pater's legacy, but he shifts the emphasis: "It was Pater, more than Arnold, Tennyson, or Ruskin, who set modern literature upon its antithetical—he would have said its antinomian—course." That is to say, Mr. Donoghue highlights those elements of Pater's achievement that anticipate the critical, Romantic side of modernism: the side that exalted art as spiritual armor suited to a secular age and that found expression (for example) in Nietzsche's dictum that "we have art lest we perish from the truth." (Or —Nietzsche again—"Only as an aesthetic phenomenon is life and the world eternally justified.") As it happens, Pater claims us less through his ideas than through his sensibility, his style. He was not, Mr. Donoghue notes, really "learned in the history of art or in any of the subjects he took up—Greek myths, English poetry, Greek philosophy." Indeed,

> he was not an original thinker: virtually every idea he expressed can be traced to a source in English, French, or German writers. He is a force in the criticism of these subjects because he devised a distinctive style of writing about them: the Pateresque, a new color in the palette.

Mr. Donoghue's book is an effort to define and nurture that "new color," to recommend it anew as a compensation for the diminishments and losses of modernity. It is a measure of his eloquence that he succeeds in rendering the Pateresque at least momentarily plausible; it is a measure of the limitations of his chosen subject that that plausibility remains momentary, episodic.

Mr. Donoghue has segregated the biographical portion of his story in a "brief life" of some seventy pages at the beginning of the book. In some ways, it is remarkable that he was able to draw it out as long as he did. Pater extended his discretion even into the minutiae of his biography: his was a life notable above all for its lack of incident. We do, however, have the usual official signposts. We know that he was born Walter Horatio Pater near Stepney in 1839, the second son and third child of Richard and Maria Pater. A fourth child, Clara Ann, was born in 1841. Pater's father, a surgeon who catered to the poor, died shortly after Clara's birth at the age of forty-five. The family then moved to Enfield and, later, to Canterbury. In 1854, Pater's mother died, leaving the children in the care of their aunt Elizabeth. Pater was educated at the King's School, Canterbury, and then at Queen's College, Oxford, where he read widely but took an indifferent degree in 1862. While at Oxford he studied with the great Platonist Benjamin Jowett and came under the influence of Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin. He also, like so many university students then and later, used his college years as an opportunity to shed his religious faith. By 1859, Mr. Donoghue reports, Pater's attitude toward Christianity was "frivolous." He was, for example, overheard to say that it would be great fun to take Holy Orders without believing a word of Christian doctrine. His effort to put this scheme into effect was prevented by a friend who wrote to the Bishop of London, acquainting him with the state of Pater's beliefs.

In 1862, Pater's aunt Elizabeth died, and he set up house in London with Clara and his elder sister, Hester. In 1864, he won a provisional fellowship to Brasenose College, Oxford. The fellowship was confirmed the following year, and Pater settled into the pattern he would maintain for the rest of his

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life. Cared for by his maiden sisters, he shuttled quietly between Oxford and London, made occasional trips to the continent, and devoted himself to reading, writing, teaching, and aesthetic refinement. His circle of friends included Edmund Gosse, Mr. and Mrs. Humphry Ward, the classicist Ingram Bywater, as well as the influential Oxford don Mark Pattison and his young wife, twenty-seven years his junior, who are generally thought to have provided George Eliot with her models for Mr. Casaubon and Dorothea in *Middlemarch*. Pater's first visit to Italy, in the summer of 1865, was a revelation. He found in the Renaissance paintings he saw in Ravenna, Pisa, and Florence "the imagery of a richer, more daring sense of life than any to be seen in Oxford." It was then that he began "to associate the Italian Renaissance with freedom" and abundant sensuous life. In effect, "the Renaissance" for Pater named not a historical period but a state of mind, a promise of fulfillment.

It is here, just as Pater's career is about to begin, that things get difficult for the biographer. Like his image of Botticelli, Pater's life was "almost colourless." Mr. Donoghue notes that most people who write about Pater assume that "he must have had more life than appears, since otherwise he would have to be deemed a freak of nature." But the record shows that "by comparison with his grand contemporaries, he seems hardly to have lived." Thomas Hardy, meeting Pater in London in 1886, noted that his manner was "that of one carrying weighty ideas without spilling them." Deliquescence was as much a theme in his life as in his work. "There are," Mr. Donoghue notes, "weeks or even months in which he seems to have taken his favorite theme of evanescence and drifted away. We assume that he is still alive, but the evidence for his breathing is meagre."

Although he was clearly homosexual by disposition, Pater's fastidious nature—what Christopher Ricks called his "greed for fineness"—forbade anything so obvious as a love affair or a sex life. He was, as Edmund Wilson put it, "one of those semi-monastic types . . . that the English universities breed: vowed to an academic discipline but cherishing an intense originality, painfully repressed and incomplete but in the narrow field of their art somehow both sound and bold." In the event, Pater contented himself with a few passionate friendships and an ardent contemplation of youthful male beauty wherever it chanced to present itself. It was a great sorrow to him, a lover of elegance, that he was himself physically unprepossessing: bald, bulky, and bushy in his formidable mustachios. Nonetheless, beginning in 1869 Pater dressed the part of a dandy. Mr. Donoghue equips him with top hat, black tailcoat, silk tie of apple green, dark-striped trousers, yellow gloves, and patent leather shoes. Pater appears as Mr. Rose in W. H. Mallock's satire *The New Republic* (1877): a "pale creature, with large moustache, looking out of the window at the sunset. . . . [H]e always speaks in an undertone, and his two topics are self-indulgence and art." In 1894, the last year of his life, Pater was invited to meet Mallarmé, who was then lecturing at Oxford. Mallarmé taught English in a *lycée*; Pater's French was excellent; but the two connoisseurs of intimation apparently thought it too vulgar actually to speak. According to one account, they "regarded each other in silence, and were satisfied."

Pater was not entirely without gumption; only he tended to hoard it for his imagination. The infamous Frank Harris—editor of the *Saturday Review*, sexual braggart, and author of the pornographic fantasy *My Life and Loves* (four volumes)—is notoriously an unreliable witness. But his anecdote about Pater has the ring of authenticity:

> He seemed at times half to realize his own deficiency. "Had I So-and-so's courage and hardihood," he cried once, "I'd have—." Suddenly the mood changed, the light in the eyes died out, the head drooped forward again, and with a half smile he added. "I might have been a criminal—he, he," and he moved with little careful steps across the room to his chair, and sat down.

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The problem with Harris's anecdote is that it traps Pater in his caricature. It may be true; but it is not the whole truth. Such stories make it difficult to understand the genuine boldness of Pater's work: to appreciate, for example, the enormous scandal that *The Renaissance* caused when it was first published in 1873. Originally titled *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, the slim volume consists of nine essays, some of which had been already published in one form or another, plus a brief preface and (in most editions) a conclusion. As Pater's friend Mrs. Mark Pattison noted in an otherwise friendly review of the book, the title is "misleading" because "the historical element is precisely that which is wanting. . . . [T]he work is in no wise a contribution to the history of the Renaissance." Pater took the point. In subsequent editions it was called by the title we know today, *The Renaissance; Studies in Art and Poetry.*

Not that the change of title really addressed Mrs. Pattison's criticism. "The book," another contemporary reviewer warned, "is not for any beginner to turn to in search of 'information.'" "Facts" and historical accuracy are not the coin in which Pater traded. For him, history was a mine to be worked for the *frisson* of insight; a certain amount of poetic license only aided the process.

Perhaps the chief instance of poetic license concerned the term "Renaissance." That Pater's conception of the Renaissance was idiosyncratic is clear first of all from the topics that he aggregated under the rubric. The book includes essays on such bona fide Renaissance figures as Pico della Mirandola, Leonardo, and Michelangelo; his essay on Botticelli did much to introduce the relatively unknown painter to the public. But the book also includes pieces on the medieval philosopher and ill-fated lover, Abelard, and the eighteenth-century art historian and impresario for "the glory that was Greece," Johann Winckelmann.

Pater notes that although interest in the Renaissance "mainly lies" in fifteenth-century Italy, he understands the term in "a much wider scope than was intended by those who originally used it to denote that revival of classical antiquity in the fifteenth century." For him, the Renaissance is a distinctive "outbreak of the human spirit" whose defining characteristics include "the care for physical beauty, the worship of the body, the breaking down of those limits which the religious system of the middle ages imposed on the heart and the imagination." Thus it is that although Winckelmann (who had long been one of Pater's culture heroes) was born in 1717, Pater concludes that he "really belongs in spirit to an earlier age" by virtue of "his enthusiasm for the things of the intellect and the imagination for their own sake, by his Hellenism, his life-long struggle to attain to the Greek spirit." For Pater, "Renaissance" was shorthand for a certain species of aesthetic vibrancy.

It was not necessarily a wholesome vibrancy. Part of what made Pater's debut scandalous was the hothouse atmosphere that he reveled in: the ripe, over-ripe sensorium that was so distant from the brisk admonitions of such pragmatic partisans of culture as Matthew Arnold. Pater's fascination with violence and death, with the interpenetration of death and beauty, was part of that ripeness. In his essay on Michelangelo, for example, Pater tells us that that great artist, like "all the nobler souls of Italy," "is much occupied with thoughts of the grave, and his true mistress is death—death at first as the worst of all sorrows and disgraces; . . . afterwards, death in its high distinction, its detachment from vulgar needs, the angry stains of life and action escaping fast." For Pater every genuine love was a kind of *Liebestod*.

But it was not only the atmosphere of Pater's book that shocked readers. Even more important was the blithe, aesthetic paganism that was implicit throughout *The Renaissance* and that Pater explicitly set forth in his conclusion. Dilating on "the splendour of our experience and its awful brevity," he recommended seizing the moment, re-

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gardless of the consequences: "Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end." Since "a counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life," "our one chance" lay in "expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time." Neither morality nor religion figured in Pater's equation. What mattered was the intensity, the ecstasy of experience. Consequently, we must grasp "at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend." For Pater, the measure of life was not its adherence to an ideal but the perfection of self-satisfaction. "To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life." Pleasure, not duty, was the cardinal imperative. Life was not a continuously unfolding whole but a series of lyric moments: "In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits."

Aesthetes embraced Pater's expostulation. The young Oscar Wilde declared that *The Renaissance* was "the golden book of spirit and sense, the holy writ of beauty." Others were not so enthusiastic. The Rev. John Wordsworth, a colleague of Pater's at Brasenose, acknowledged the book's "beauty of style" and "felicity of thought." But he objected that the fundamental message of the book was immoral: "I cannot disguise from myself," he wrote in a letter to Pater,

> that the concluding pages adequately sum up the philosophy of the whole; and that that philosophy is an assertion that no fixed principles either of religion or morality can be regarded as certain, that the only thing worth living for is momentary enjoyment and that probably or certainly the soul dissolves at death into elements which are destined never to reunite.

Nor were Christian clergymen the only critics of Pater's hedonism. The book was widely regarded as an invitation to moral frivolity. George Eliot spoke for many when she wrote that it was "quite poisonous in its false principles of criticism and false conceptions of life."

No one was more shocked by the scandal that *The Renaissance* precipitated than Pater himself. He did not abandon his aestheticsm. But he did attempt to modulate it. In the second edition of *The Renaissance* he dropped the conclusion altogether. Later, he restored it, but with cosmetic modifications and a note informing readers that he had worried that "it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall." When *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published, Pater took the opportunity to distinguish his version of Epicureanism from Wilde's:

> A true Epicureanism aims at a complete though harmonious development of man's entire organism. To lose the moral sense therefore, for instance, the sense of sin and righteousness, as [does] Mr. Wilde's hero—his heroes are bent on doing as speedily, as completely as they can—is to lose, or lower, organisation, to become less complex, to pass from a higher to a lower degree of development. . . . Lord Henry, and even more the, from the first, suicidal hero, loses too much in life to be a true Epicurean.

Pater attempted to provide a portrait of the "true Epicurean" in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), an overwrought, somewhat ponderous autobiographical novel that describes the spiritual journey of its hero from paganism to the threshold of Christianity. (Pater much preferred hovering on the threshold of commitment to actually embracing any definite faith.) According to Mr. Donoghue, "the main reason [for writing the book] was to refute the charge, levelled against *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, that he was a hedonist, an epicurean and—the implication was clear—that he instructed his undergraduates at Brasenose to live for pleasure alone." In fact, Pater did believe in living for pleasure alone. But he

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thought that careful discrimination among pleasures redeemed his aestheticism from vulgar hedonism or immorality.

Did it? In part. Pater would certainly have recoiled in horror from the crude narcissism and decadence that his work helped to inspire. But it is not at all clear that George Eliot was mistaken in castigating his "false principles of criticism and false conceptions of life." Mr. Donoghue wishes to resuscitate Pater partly because he thinks that a Pateresque aestheticism encourages readers to deal with art on its own terms, as affording an experience valuable in itself. "There are," he writes, "some experiences which are best approached on the assumption that their value is intrinsic." This is certainly true. And it may be that Pater's view of art, as Mr. Donoghue claims, can help to immunize art from ideology. Because he held that art "has no moral design upon us," Pater would have had no patience with efforts to subject aesthetic experience to politics—or any other "external" value. "In its primary aspect," he wrote in *The Renaissance*, "a great picture has no more definite message for us than an accidental play of sunlight and shadow for a few moments on the wall or floor."

Yet this is not the whole story. Mr. Donoghue writes that "the purpose of art is to offer the distressed soul release, however temporary." This is not a new theme for him. In his book *The Arts Without Mystery* (1984), for example, Mr. Donoghue worried that our commitment to scientific rationality had drained the arts of their power to enchant and to kindle the imagination.[2] He sought to "reinstate mystery" into the arts while at the same time distinguishing mystery "from mere bewilderment or mystification." For Mr. Donoghue, the artist is most truly himself when he stands in an antagonistic or (one of his favorite words) "antinomian" attitude toward society. Yet this Romanticism is sharply qualified by prudence, the most un-Romantic of virtues. He understands that the main business of society cannot countenance the extravagances that the artistic imagination furnishes.

> The arts are on the margin, and it doesn't bother me to say they are marginal. What bothers me are the absurd claims we make for them. I want to say the margin is the place for those feelings and intuitions which daily life doesn't have a place for, and mostly seems to suppress. . . . With the arts, people can make a space for themselves, and fill it with intimations of freedom and presence.

Pater would have agreed. "What modern art has to do in the service of culture," he wrote in his essay on Winckelmann,

> is so to rearrange the details of modern life, so to reflect it, that it may satisfy the spirit. And what does the spirit need in the face of modern life? The sense of freedom. . . . The chief factor in the thoughts of the modern mind concerning itself is the intricacy, the universality of natural law, even in the moral order. For us, necessity is . . . a magic web woven through and through us, like that magnetic system of which modern science speaks, penetrating us with a network, subtler than our subtlest nerves, yet bearing in it the central forces of the world. Can art represent men and women in these bewildering toils so as to give the spirit at least the equivalent for the sense of freedom?

The real question, for Mr. Donoghue as well as for Pater, is whether that "equivalent for the sense of freedom" is anything more than illusion. Does Pater's philosophy—does any thoroughgoing aestheticism—really leave room for "intrinsic value" as Mr. Donoghue claims?

In his preface to *The Renaissance*, Pater begins by *seeming* to agree with Matthew Arnold's famous definition of criticism, but he then slyly inverts Arnold's meaning:

> "To see the object as in itself it really is," has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really

2 See my review of the book in *The New Criterion* for September 1984.

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> is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly. . . . What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? . . . [T]he picture, the landscape, the engaging personality in life or in a book . . . are valuable for their virtues, as we say, in speaking of an herb, a wine, a gem; for the property each has of affecting one with a special, a unique, impression of pleasure.

For Pater, "one's own impression" trumps meaning. And it is a curious irony, as the critic Adam Phillips has observed, that although Pater insists on the value of discrimination and accurate identification of the critic's "impressions," his vocabulary is "notably vague." Thus it is that he "exploited the invitation of inexact words: 'sweet,' 'peculiar,' 'delicate,' and above all 'strange.'"

Mr. Donoghue rightly notes that Pater "looked at an object under the sign of pleasure, not of truth." He approvingly quotes another critic who spoke of "the disjunction of sensation from judgment" in Pater's work. The "Paterian imagination," he writes, seeks "relations" instead of "duties." "It follows that Pater practised consciousness not as a mode of knowledge but as an alternative to knowledge. . . . One of the ways in which Pater was antinomian was in his being ready to think that understanding wasn't everything." Indeed, his chief concern was "his pleasure in feeling alive." "Aesthetic criticism" in Pater's sense deals "not with objects, works of art, but with the types of feeling they embodied. . . . Ontology is displaced by psychology."

"Ontology is displaced by psychology": in other words, what matters for Pater are states of feeling, not truth. At the end of his book, Mr. Donoghue acknowledges the "risks" of aestheticism: "triviality, exquisiteness, solipsism." An additional risk is losing the weight or reality of one's experience. T. S. Eliot criticized Pater for propounding "a theory of ethics" in the guise of a theory of art. What he meant was that Pater's conception of "aesthetic criticism" offered not a principle of criticism but a way of life. At the center of that way of life is the imperative to regard all experience as an occasion for aesthetic delectation: a seemingly attractive proposition, perhaps, until one realizes that it depends upon a narcissistic self-absorption that renders every moral demand negotiable. "The sense of freedom" is indeed the essence of aestheticism; but it is the cold and lonely freedom of the isolated individual. This was something that Kierkegaard exposed with great clarity in his anatomy of "the aesthetic mode of life" in *Either/Or*. Mr. Donoghue tells us that "the part of Aestheticism which should now be recovered . . . is its concern for the particularity of form in every work of art." The problem is that although aestheticism begins by emphasizing form, it ends by dissolving form into the "pleasurable sensations" and "pulsations" that Pater so valued. In this sense, aestheticism is the enemy of the intrinsic. Mr. Donoghue criticized Eliot's essay on Pater as "extravagant" and "cruel." But Eliot was right: the theory of "art for art's sake" is "valid in so far as it can be taken as an exhortation to the artist to stick to his job; it never was and never can be valid for the spectator, reader or auditor."

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Dumbing down Debussy

by John Simon

Question: When is a forest not a forest? *Answer*: When in a modern stage production the text specifically calls for one. Director's theater—which I define as the artistically impotent becoming managerially omnipotent—has been bad enough in the theater; in opera, nowadays, it is lethal. If the action is laid in a pleasure garden, expect an abattoir; if in a village square, expect a spaceship. Until fairly recently, the idea was to make an improbable setting still vaguely believable; now it is to make it totally preposterous and thus exquisitely titillating.

My concern here is with two mountings of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, one at the Los Angeles Music Center Opera, staged by Peter Sellars, the other at New York's Metropolitan Opera, directed by Jonathan Miller. I have given more than passing thought to which was the greater abomination, but I still can't decide. Confronted with bottomless idiocy, all yardsticks fall short. Though there was quite a bit of booing at the Los Angeles première, there was none at the Met, perhaps because it marked Frederica von Stade's silver jubilee. But more likely because audiences have become so brainwashed—or have so little taste, intelligence, and knowledge of opera—that they lap up whatever offal is shoveled at them.

First, let me refresh your memory about Debussy's only completed opera, one of the flawless diamonds of the repertory, and certainly one of the most beautiful and influential modern operas, arguably *the* most beautiful and influential. Debussy had seen Maurice Maeterlinck's 1892 play *Pelléas et Mélisande* at an 1893 special matinée at Lugné-Poë's Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, and fell for it immediately. He nosed out Puccini for the rights to make an opera of it; Maeterlinck himself made some useful suggestions about how to adapt it. The composer went to work, but the première did not take place till 1902, at the Opéra Comique; a furious—and utterly unmusical—Maeterlinck did everything in his power to stop or sabotage it because his mistress, Georgette Leblanc, was not cast in the female lead. The opera was a slow-building hit, but Debussy kept tinkering with it, and was still at it at his death in 1918.

Pelléas is a symbolist work, set in the imaginary medieval kingdom of Allemonde—a bilingual pun on "the whole world," worthy of Maeterlinck, a Fleming who wrote in French. Golaud, the prince of the land, loses his way in a thick forest during a boar hunt. By a spring, he discovers a lost and frightened girl, Mélisande; her coronet has fallen into the water, but she won't let Golaud retrieve it. She has been through hell, but refuses to talk about it or say who she is. Night is falling; reluctantly, she agrees to follow the prince: two lost souls uneasily joined.

Arkel, Golaud's nonagenarian, nearly blind grandfather, rules Allemonde from his castle. Geneviève, mother of Golaud and his

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half-brother, Pelléas, reads Golaud's letter to Pelléas out loud to the old king. A widower, Golaud has married the mysterious waif of the woods and upset Arkel's plans for a political marriage. Arkel resigns himself to the inevitable, and Pelléas can light the signal permitting Golaud and his bride to disembark. Pelléas wants to leave to visit a dying friend, but Arkel reminds him that Pelléas's own father is gravely ill in the castle; moreover he should be there to welcome Golaud and Mélisande. On a walk through the dark castle gardens, Geneviève, Mélisande, and Pelléas listen to the song of the sailors on the ship that brought Mélisande; it is headed into a storm and possible shipwreck. Pelléas again talks of going on a trip tomorrow; the girl asks him why he must leave. Both statements testify to a nascent attraction.

Act II begins with Pelléas bringing Mélisande to the Fountain of the Blind in the castle park; legend has it that it used to be able to cure the sightless. Pelléas observes that it is by such a fountain that Mélisande met Golaud; she tells him how she refused to be kissed at that meeting. She leans over the water and keeps provocatively tossing her wedding ring into the air. The young man worries that she will fall in; instead, the ring does. Mélisande is scared: what will she tell Golaud? "La vérité! La vérité!" counsels Pelléas. It is noon; at the very same time, in another part of the forest, Golaud is thrown by his horse and injured.

Mélisande is attending her husband's sickbed. She tells Golaud, "Je ne suis pas heureuse," but does not say why. This statement becomes her verbal leitmotif; her musical one, the loveliest in the entire opera, is one of deep yearning. Golaud notices that she is not wearing his ring. She lies that she has lost it in the grotto by the sea. Golaud bids her to look for it immediately; as it is night, Pelléas is to accompany her.

The pair arrive at the grotto, faintly illuminated by moonlight. Mélisande must be enabled to describe that place to her husband. The clouds suddenly lift, and a strong moonbeam reveals three old beggars; though fast asleep, they frighten the girl. Pelléas explains that there is a famine in the land: the three came here for shelter.

Act III: night again. At her high tower window, Mélisande is combing her ankle-long hair. She sings, or improvises, a ballad about a girl born "on a Sunday at noon." Pelléas appears below, entranced by the golden hair. He cannot reach the girl, but he plays rapturously with her spilled tresses: "Je les tiens dans les mains, je les tiens dans la bouche, je les tiens dans les bras, je les mets autour de mon cou." (In the brochure to one of the opera's recordings, Dietmar Holland comments "dass sie ihn . . . in erotische Ekstase versetzt." The English translation reads: "His heart melts.") Golaud catches them at it, and orders them to stop their childish games. But he suspects something more.

Next morning, Golaud leads Pelléas down into the castle's underground vaults, where yet another pool looms dark and mephitic. Golaud holds his half-brother's hand while he makes him bend over and look. If he let go . . . This is a threat. Up on the sunny terrace again, Pelléas exults. But Golaud warns him to stay politely away from Mélisande, who is expecting a child. That night, under her window, Golaud's suspicions overwhelm him. He questions little Yniold, his child from his first marriage, about what he has observed in the past, then holds him up to the window to spy for him. The boy can report no evil. Hurt by his father's rough questioning, he dries up.

In Act IV, Pelléas takes the advice of his (unseen) father and resolves to leave, but arranges a farewell meeting with Mélisande at the Fountain of the Blind. Arkel—poor, purblind fool—thinks that with the recovery of Pelléas's father things will take a turn for the better, and that Mélisande has brought joy into the dark castle. Golaud storms in, accusing her of infidelity, forces her to her knees, and drags her about by the hair ("Ah, your long hair is finally good for something!"); only Arkel's intervention saves her from worse.

By the fountain in the park, Yniold has lost a golden ball wedged between rocks too

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heavy to budge. As he struggles vainly, a flock of sheep is herded by. The boy asks why they are more unruly than usual; the offstage shepherd answers it is because they are not being led to the sheepfold. The road, we can guess, leads to slaughter.

Now Pelléas waits by the fountain for Mélisande. She arrives, but refuses to hide in the shadows. In the revealing moonlight, they acknowledge their love. Glimpsing Golaud among the trees, the two kiss defiantly. Enraged, he races forward and, with his sword, runs through the unarmed Pelléas. Mélisande, bemoaning her cowardice, flees.

Act V: Mélisande, having given birth prematurely to a daughter, is dying—not from the slight wound Golaud has inflicted on her. She has forgotten everything, and when the repentant Golaud nevertheless can't help importuning her about "La vérité! La vérité!" concerning her and Pelléas, she repeats the phrase and protests their innocence. Her baby is brought to her, and she comments to it on the sadness of living, then quietly dies. Arkel remarks woefully, "Now it's the poor little one's turn."

Clearly, what Maeterlinck wrote and Debussy set to music is, Baudelaireanly speaking, a forest of symbols. It takes place in no specific time, in no specific place, as fairy tales do, though unlike most of them, it is tragic. It has the appropriate settings: forest, sea, castle, grotto, subterranean vault, fountain with magic powers; also the characteristic threefold repetition: Mélisande was born at noon, loses her ring at noon, which is also when Golaud is thrown by his horse. There are three crucial wells (or springs, or fountains); there are three ominous sleeping beggars; the key phrase, "La vérité! La vérité!" occurs thrice. There is the Rapunzel-like letting down of the long golden hair. There is also the mystery of the secretive heroine's provenance. It has been compellingly suggested that she is one of Bluebeard's escaped wives, as, indeed, there is a Mélisande in *Ariane et Barbe Bleue*, a somewhat later opera by Debussy's friend Dukas, for which Maeterlinck wrote the libretto.

Thus it is catastrophic to tamper with the vagueness and timelessness of the setting. The fairy-tale ecumenism allows us to sense the fatality, the universality, the symbolism of the story unimpeded and undiluted. Put it into a specific historic setting—whether on today's Malibu beach, as Peter Sellars does, or into a crumbling mansion in Debussy's time, as Jonathan Miller would have it—and the denotations will fight the connotations, and vice versa. And if, like that fine-feathered pair, you utterly ignore the text and the stage directions, you place an inflated ego between the work and the audience, making every seat in the opera house one with an obstructed view.

It would have been easy for Maeterlinck to set the story in a particular period or locale—he did so in some other plays—but the point was precisely a parable, or paradigm. A poetic nowhere was needed to evoke a real everywhere. To force it back into anything more defined is to go widdershins against the wishes of playwright and composer—as obtuse as to translate the English translation of a great Latin poem back into one's own prosaic Latin. It does not increase the work's credibility, it diminishes it. There is no way of making the accouterments of the tale believable in a modern setting.

Peter Sellars has, as usual, pontificated away about what his version was meant to accomplish, and, as usual, he contradicted himself right and left. "This opera is done quite frequently in a manner where it's a bit vague. . . . I'm making it unbearably clear. . . . It's not just a private revenge tragedy—you know, a kind of petty tale of jealousy between two brothers—but actually is about the dysfunction of an entire society, and how that plays itself out in the personal lives of the people who are in charge."[1] That is already nonsense: Maeterlinck spurned anything so small as a society; he aimed at the world—Allemonde—and its fatal, eternal verities.

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1 Quoted from *Opera News*, April 1, 1995, as reported by F. Paul Driscoll.

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Elsewhere, Sellars has declared, "I have gone out of my way to demonstrate that Debussy was writing very specific music for very specific situations." And, "For me, yes, this is very much Malibu, but at the same time the set doesn't have a sign on it that says 'Malibu.'"[2] So it is Malibu and it isn't; and it's about a whole society, but also about some very specific things. "When you say, 'I'm lost in the woods,' that doesn't mean that a whole bunch of trees suddenly sprang up and you got lost in them. It's an expression for what somebody is feeling in their life. So when Golaud opens the opera by saying, 'I'm lost in the woods,' you take that as a metaphor for somebody expressing their spiritual and mental state." Yes, but when your production takes a metaphor and explains it, it is no longer a metaphor, and loses its power to symbolize.

But let's go along with Sellars. So someone on a metaphorical boar hunt in a metaphorical forest might say, "God knows where this boar has led me. I thought I had inflicted a mortal wound, and here are traces of blood. But I've lost the beast, and now I myself am lost; even my dogs can't catch up with me. I better retrace my steps." Or words to that effect. Since all this is clearly metaphorical, it must mean something like this: "I'm lost in a staging by that bore Peter Sellars. I thought that when I banged him on the head, I was rid of him for good; still, he got away before I could finish the job. And here I am tracking him in a disreputable part of town full of all-male bordellos, where not even a police dog would venture. I better get the hell back." And, clearly, when Golaud tells the lost Mélisande that she should let him lead her out of this dark, dangerous forest, he means out of accidie, out of depression. Listening to Golaud is, in effect, listening to Prozac.

How does Sellars stage this scene? We are on some sort of beach, as a row of blinking blue neon footlights (the ocean) indicates, though why the background is blood-red remains unclear. We are, moreover, in front of a very modern building shown in cross section. To our right, on a diagonal, is a large cement drainpipe that empties into the ocean. (I didn't know they had such things in Malibu.) On this pipe sits a black man with a revolver in his hand. (That he must be black is clear from the part's having been similarly cast in Amsterdam, where this production was first staged in 1993.) He is contemplating suicide; first he puts the gun in his mouth, then, perhaps because it is hard to sing with a gun in one's mouth, he holds it to his throat. This is Golaud, lost in the metaphorical forest on a metaphorical boar hunt.

He encounters a woman, not especially girlish or childish, on the beach, and proceeds to pick her up. There is, of course, no reason for her to be in any special danger on the Malibu beach—at least no more than anywhere else these gun-toting days—and a black stranger with a handgun would not seem to be the surest way to safety. Nevertheless, Mélisande—for this overage hippie is she—promptly plays up to Golaud, almost flirtatious as she remarks on the gray hair at his temples. Rather unreluctantly, she goes off with him.

What have we here? Some have seen allusions in this "specific" staging to the black mayor or black police chief of Los Angeles, and to the Rodney King and O. J. Simpson cases. Sellars himself, to the best of my knowledge, has not proclaimed these parallels. Even so, his Golaud is some sort of potentate who orders the police about. The house (designed by George Tsypin) that shelters—in cross section—him and his family combines the features of a luxury villa with those of a clinic, with the kind of beds and equipment, halls and corridors, special ceiling lights we associate with a hospital. In an upstairs room, Arkel, in a wheelchair, is being fed some soup by a black nurse. In the room below, a sleeping or comatose man lies, bristling with I.V. tubes, in a hospital bed. This, we deduce, is Pelléas's father, mentioned in the text but never seen. In the

2 Quoted from *Performing Arts*, the program of the Music Center of Los Angeles County, February 1995.

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spirit of this staging, he will be referred to hereinafter as Daddy.

One of the grand absurdities of this production at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion were the surtitles high above the stage that kept correctly translating the text, only to be contradicted by the actual staging every step of the way. The three old beggars, for instance, were a bunch of homeless people of various ethnicities, who, in a crucial scene, were chained together and herded away by a bunch of cops—the same ones who, at opera's end, take away Golaud in handcuffs. There was, of course, no explanation for Golaud's contemplated suicide or any number of similar things; Sellars filled in with action the interludes Debussy composed to allow for scene shifts—as, for example, with a fight between the nurse and Arkel, presumably because he did not eat up all of his soup.

A favorite device of the director's is to bring on characters not written into a scene, or, as in the case of Daddy, into any scene of the opera. Thus in the text Geneviève, the mother, disappears from the action after some early scenes; Sellars brings her on at all sorts of times—for instance, tearfully caring for Daddy at his bedside, and thus deflecting attention from where it ought to go. Moreover, if a character were actually meant to be present in such a scene, he or she would be given something to sing; to have the personage moping about as a big, silent lump makes no psychological or dramatic sense.

The staging is consistently bizarre. The house—or clinic—has a huge central hall onto which the other rooms open. For some inexplicable reason, this is where Golaud's bed is, hardly the place for the heir presumptive to cozy up to his timid bride. But Mélisande seems to have also another, upstairs room. (Separate beds this early on in the marriage?) Outside this boudoir is a terrace, where Sellars places the "Rapunzel scene." Instead of having Pelléas caress Mélisande's hair yearningly from below, he has the youth mount up to the terrace by a set of crescent-shaped iron rods, stuck stepwise into the building's façade, and perfect for lovers or burglars to climb up on. Mélisande has been combing her hair with a red comb, and a whorehouse-red light glows through the glass doors of her room behind her. Soon Pelléas is on top of her in explicit intercourse. Under the circumstances, his line "Je ne puis pas monter plus haut" (duly surtitled "I cannot mount any higher") is either an absurdity or an obscenity.

But there is more. Watching his half-brother copulate with his wife is Golaud, his black silhouette clearly visible through the glass door against the red background. Sellars explains: "He sees his brother having sex with *his* wife. I think the music is as specific as possible—as an evocation of sexual experience, that music is hardly between the lines—it is right on. And again, one has to take his line, 'how I love playing with your hair' as a rather sexual image, an image used the only way that at the end of the nineteenth century you could refer to sex onstage." Right on! Nineteenth-century stage poetry finally decoded: hair-play is sex-play. And what about that hardly-between-the-lines music? What is the exact musical notation for an orgasm?

Pelléas, in any case, never says anything as simplistic as "how I love playing with your hair." He says much more rapt, lyrical things. But whatever he says, no sex is consummated here. The whole point is that these two innocents do not fully recognize their feelings until the night by the fountain that bestows sight, just before Pelléas's intended departure, which fate will not allow. The truth bursts upon them just ahead of Golaud's sword—an unlikely Samurai sword in the Sellars version. Because of this last-minute, unfulfillable realization, Mélisande on her deathbed can parry Golaud's maniacal questioning with the assertion that she and Pelléas loved each other guiltlessly. Why, besides, would Golaud do all that questioning, even preventing his wife from dying peacefully, if he had watched her and Pelléas coupling on the terrace? Is Golaud an imbecile? Or is, perhaps, Sellars? One of the tragic points here is that man can never be

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sure of the truth: all those reiterated *vérités* wiggle out of the hands like slippery eels. Certainty is not of this earth.

The final death scene is staged by Sellars with supreme dementia. Because Golaud tells Mélisande he too will die, and that she must tell the truth to a dying man, Sellars has Golaud assault the moribund Mélisande physically, drag her out of bed, toss her onto the floor, kick her half way under the bed where Geneviève will try to comfort her. And now Golaud lies down in Mélisande's place, his big feet protruding from the foot of the bed. Sellars takes Golaud's self-dramatization literally, and the result is a piece of staging simultaneously so repellent and ludicrous as to reveal the true schlockmeister's hand.

And that is not all. When Mélisande dazedly asks to see her baby—her illness has made her amnesiac—she asks where the infant is. "Here," says Arkel, holding up the baby girl. Because the dying mother is too weak, he says, "I'll hold her myself." Instead, Sellars has Daddy go and beamingly fetch the baby. For some reason, Daddy has the face and clothes of a bum (an underpaid walk-on?), and the grin of a cretin. But then why does Sellars say "the final image is that of a ninety-year-old man holding a new-born baby, which is an image of our society—all the generations in between simply wiped out"? But then what about Daddy? And Geneviève, similarly dragged in? And Golaud, even if he has crawled into bed? What is our boy wonder talking about? AIDS? The mental nullity of Generation X? A Third World War I'm not aware of? It is nonsense in terms of both the opera and our world. And he goes on vaticinating: "This old leadership is dead set in its ways, will not relinquish power and actually snuffs out the two generations beneath it. Arkel at the age of ninety will not step aside and is holding onto power with a kind of viciousness . . ." when actually he is holding on to the baby with heartbreaking empathy.

Arkel's last words in this alleged snuff opera are, "[The child] must live now in her [mother's] place. It's the poor little thing's turn." Tragic history keeps repeating itself. Earlier, the dying Mélisande said of her daughter, "She doesn't laugh. She is small. She too will weep. I pity her." Still earlier, Arkel had lamented, "If I were God, I would have pity on the hearts of men." Hardly the words of a tyrant and usurper.

But nothing in Sellars is lacking in unconscious humor. The minatory visit to the underground vault is a mere walk along the footlights in front of a drop curtain. When Mélisande is drifting off during Golaud's crazed questioning, the husband cries out, "Où es-tu, Mélisande? Où es-tu?" In Sellars's version, with hubby in wife's bed, and wifey kicked under it, I fully expected her to pipe up, "Here I am, under the bed." And in the end, when all the black-clad serving women are supposed to file in sensing death in the house, Sellars has three black nurses (in Amsterdam there were four, but one must have gotten lost in the crossing) enter to a processional music clearly meant to accommodate twenty or thirty: "Toutes ces femmes," says the text. It is risible, especially if you consider that two of these nurses were seen a bit earlier washing the floors of the hall. This is supposed to be specific? Nowadays even maids, to say nothing of nurses, refuse to do windows. Never mind floors.

Equally preposterous in its own way is Jonathan Miller's wholly indoor *Pelléas et Mélisande* at the Met. For this, John Conklin has designed an elaborate set mounted on a revolving stage and representing a crumbling *fin-de-siècle* mansion. As the stage keeps revolving—always between scenes, and almost always during—you think you're in one of those panoramic restaurants high above one of our major cities, except that the view is much less rewarding, and quite claustrophobic. It is always tall, crumbling walls and columns; empty picture frames stacked all over; marble busts, mostly in bunches on the floor; furniture covered with sheets; some enormous scaffoldings (they have to stand in for the underground vaults, for Golaud to make like pushing Pelléas off them—but why would the pair of them have

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climbed up there in the first place?); rooms and more decaying rooms.

Yet Miller has a whole battery of impeccably liveried servants hovering about in this supposedly Proustian approach to the work. Miller has described this in a *New York Times* interview [3] as "an ever-present below-the-stairs world." Hasn't he confused *Remembrance of Things Past* with "Upstairs, Downstairs"? He continues: "They behave with dignified punctilio, then relax and flirt together at the back of a scene." Instead of all this dignified punctilio, how about a little elbow grease and some not-so-relaxed house cleaning? "Debussy and Proust," Miller expounds, were "two semi-modern figures longing for the lost order of royalist France." Here he seems to confuse Proust and Debussy with Léon Daudet and Charles Maurras of the *Action française*. He also mentions Alain-Fournier's charmingly nostalgic *Le grand Maulnes*, a novel that has nothing to do with Debussy or the Maeterlinck text.

At the Met, the only faint sense of the outdoors comes from a drop curtain on which is fuzzily projected a photograph by Eugène Atget, representing the weather-worn, high-pedestaled statue of a faun (the afternoon of?) in an autumnal alley of semi-denuded trees. (The faun looks so abraded, I first mistook him for a dog.) In the opening scene, Golaud enters this dilapidated mansion with a shotgun, an odd place to go boar hunting. Even stranger is the fountain in the middle of the living room, and by it a Mélisande wearing an average pony tail, later described as hair that is longer than she herself. The Fountain of the Blind will be much the same sort of slightly oversized goldfish bowl, in which Pelléas fears that Mélisande might drown!

Even though those interludes Debussy composed were sufficient to cover the scene changes on the Opéra Comique's 1902 stage, at the up-to-date, state-of-the-art Met, with that fancy turntable, James Levine often has to observe minutes of silence between scenes while some puny change of scenery is effectuated—such as hanging an elaborate chandelier, for no good reason, downstage left in the middle of nowhere and nothing. Among the most laughable scenes is, predictably, the Rapunzel one. Here we have a smallish cardboard flat with a square hole in it for a window a few feet above the stage floor. Under it is a bench for Pelléas not even to stand but sit on, while above him Mélisande combs out her anemic tresses. All the yearning swain would have to do is walk a few steps to the edge of the flat, fully visible on the stage, walk around it a few steps more, then grab Mélisande from behind and pull her off the stepladder she is standing on. Instead, he sits on that bench facing the audience (not Mélisande!) and keeps gesticulating weirdly, as if performing *plastique*, that slow, stately sort of dancing of which Shaw wrote in *Music in London*, "The unhappy students had been taught 'plastique' until they dared not call their arms and legs their own." At other times, it looks as if Pelléas were practicing the arcane handshakes of a secret society.

No less absurd is the staging of Yniold's encounter with the slaughter-bound sheep. We see him sleeping in a bed that slowly revolves from left to right; in the process, he talks (or sings) in his sleep the entire soliloquy about the ball lost among the rocks, and the meeting with the doomed flock; usually one counts sheep *before* falling asleep. The voice of the shepherd is here a kind of oneiric ventriloquism. Again, in Miller's version, Golaud, not content to drag Mélisande about by her hair, throws himself on top of her in attempted mate-rape, until poor old Arkel drags him off her. Occasionally we glimpse a bit of an indoor tree; "in a dream world," Miller explains, "a tree can grow inside a drawing room." Dream world, is it? Then why set it in a specific period locale?

Yniold, having been made to spy on the presumptive lovers by his father, has developed a ravenous appetite for espionage, and can be seen lurking or skulking about the periphery of several subsequent scenes. But Miller informs us that he will be punished

3 March 23, 1995. The interviewer was Alex Ross.

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for this perverse predilection: he "might . . . a few years later be wounded or killed on the battlefields of Verdun." More likely shot by a firing squad along with Mata Hari.

"I believe in serious acting," says Miller, but his *Pelléas* is atrociously blocked. Characters are always at the wrong end of the stage or at unsuitable distances from one another. And he has allowed John Conklin to design some real absurdities. There is, for example, half an oar nailed to a wall, its stump abutting on a door jamb. Behind Golaud's sickbed there is an enormous tilted pier-glass, obliging us to see the physically, vocally, and histrionically repellent Victor Braun, a serious overactor, in unwelcome duplicate. The costumes, light-colored until then, turn uniformly black for the last act—as if the *dramatis personae* had all been invited to a funeral. By evening's end, Debussy's opera, in Miller's hands, is more eroded than Atget's faun. Both can be taken for dogs.

What we have, then, is two different ways of laying *Pelléas* waste. Peter Sellars does it with asinine prankishness, Jonathan Miller with overcerebral elucubration. Between the trendily Malibu-beached wail and the crumbling pseudo-Proustian manor house there is little to choose from. In his memoir *Le Saut du tremplin*, Lugné-Poë reports that whenever Maeterlinck was nervous about one of his productions, his hair would grow inordinately so that he would have to rush to a barber. At either one of these events, his locks would have matched Mélisande's.

When is a forest not a forest? When the only thing that is wood is the head of the director.

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Anne Tyler in mid-course

by Brooke Allen

In a career that started over thirty years ago and shows no sign of slowing down, Anne Tyler has built herself a reputation as one of the best writers in America, winning important prizes as well as membership in the American Academy and Institute of Art and Letters. Is her place so near the top of the heap well-merited? Tyler is a good writer, to be sure, on occasion a very good one. Yet there doesn't seem to be much recognition that the quality of her work varies tremendously from novel to novel. The books for which she received the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize, *The Accidental Tourist* and *Breathing Lessons* respectively, are hardly her best, while her best books often have not been singled out for special notice. Her showier tricks have been much touted, her truer, subtler gifts often overlooked. Tyler herself, more astute than most of her critics, prizes *Celestial Navigation* (1974) above all her other work and has confessed to a wish that the four novels which preceded it might quietly disappear.

Tyler's novels, in fact, can be divided into three categories: the downright bad—a category that includes *If Morning Ever Comes* (1964), *The Tin Can Tree* (1965), *Searching for Caleb* (1975), and *Morgan's Passing* (1980); the worthwhile but extremely flawed—*A Slipping-Down Life* (1969), *The Clock Winder* (1972), *Earthly Possessions* (1977), *The Accidental Tourist* (1985), and *Breathing Lessons* (1988); and the good: *Celestial Navigation* (1974), *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982), and *Saint Maybe* (1991). It is a pleasure to be able to place her newest book, *Ladder of Years*,[1] in the last group; it is one her most accomplished and least self-indulgent pieces of work to date.

Tyler is a popular novelist, but one that, however well she writes, will never appeal to everyone. She is doggedly determined to celebrate the clutter and mess of domestic life. She speaks with a very feminine voice, and sees things from a feminine (though not necessarily "feminist") point of view. She is regional—all her novels except the first three have been set in or around Baltimore, where she has lived since 1965—and resolutely untimely: her characters are old-fashioned in the way they live and in the way they define themselves. Conventional husbands and wives, parents and children: these are Tyler's only true subjects. Her fascination with family life is rooted, she states, in the fact that it is "horrific at times" while remaining "the one situation that we are generally forced to go on with, even so, picking ourselves up and trying again in the morning. And that is valuable in itself."

A more formidable barrier to an appreciation of Tyler's work is that, while she is capable of conceiving powerful characters, she has a special interest in misfits, an interest which unfortunately is sentimental rather

1 *Ladder of Years*, by Anne Tyler; Knopf, 326 pages, $24.

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than analytical. Drifters, dreamers, Southern eccentrics: the very mention of such ghastly stock figures is enough to send this reader running the other way, and it's even more scary when an author resorts to symbolically-loaded characters like fortune-tellers, carnival workers, or, God forbid, puppeteers. Tyler does so often, and she has added to this assortment another stereotype peculiarly her own: the dizzy housewife with the repressed husband, who for all her scatterbrained impracticality can be seen to represent the richness of connected life as against isolation and sterility.

Even putting aside her unpromising Sixties novels, which can most generously be described as soggy imitations of Carson McCullers, Tyler has produced rather too many books which depend for both theme and structure upon nonsensical clichés. *Searching for Caleb* tells the story of two cousins, Justine and Duncan Peck, who escape the stuffy bourgeois world of Baltimore's Roland Park and take up a grotty itinerant life which Tyler constrains us to view as free-spirited (many Tyler characters chafe at the oppressiveness they perceive in upper-middle-class life, and the rapid descent from high respectability to the trailer park is a recurrent theme in her work). Justine, rather sickeningly warm and impulsive, becomes a fortune teller; Duncan, a typical "drifter," flits passively from job to job spouting the jargon of the intellectual manqué: "I am fascinated by randomness. Do you realize that there is no possible permutation of four fingers that could be called absolutely random?"

Morgan's Passing, written five years after *Searching for Caleb*, was hardly an improvement on it. Morgan Gower, a middle-aged, middle-class father of seven, has an irrepressible urge to wander out of his own orbit and see what other lives are like; he poses around Baltimore now as a doctor, now as a sailor—not with any sinister intent but in the most benign, not to say adorable fashion. (His wife, Bonny, voices the reader's own reservations about his character: "Oh, from the outside he seems so comic and light-hearted, such a character, so quaint, but imagine dealing with him." Tyler, however drowns this cool assessment in her own warm sea of love for Morgan.) In all honesty the reader must agree with James Wolcott, who in a review of the novel in *The New York Review of Books* cruelly and correctly pegged the insufferable Morgan as "a scruffy, king-size Life Force—Henderson the Rain King's slightly retarded brother."

These are all boring people, and they make for boring characters and boring books. Here, as in her later novels *Breathing Lessons* and *The Accidental Tourist*, Tyler makes a fatal mistake: she confuses being eccentric with being interesting. Eccentric characters often make for very dull reading, especially when they are *predictably* eccentric, as Tyler's tend to be. Thus Elizabeth, the girl-handyman in *The Clock Winder*, is for all her flouting of convention much less compelling as a character than her employer, the bourgeois Mrs. Emerson—a bossy, humorless matriarch for whom "the world was made up of people forever happy, wastefully happy, laughing at something too far away for Mrs. Emerson to see even when she stood on tiptoe."

And yet Tyler's weakness is also her strength. Her focus upon people who are unreflective, inarticulate, either intellectually or emotionally limited has produced her finest characters as well as her silliest. Tyler has stated that the single piece of fiction that has influenced her the most is Eudora Welty's "The Wide Net," which she read as a teenaged student in Reynolds Price's writing class at Duke University. "I can even name the line," she says. "It's the one where she says Edna Earle is so dim she could spend all day pondering on how the little tail on the 'C' got through the 'L' in a Coca-Cola sign. I knew many Edna Earles. I didn't know you could write about them."

The first intimation that Tyler could in fact write about Edna Earles with anything like Welty's truth was in her 1974 novel *Celestial Navigation*, a work of beauty and skill. In that book Tyler put aside her pen-

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chant for the lovable and the poignant and told a bleak, strong story of an agoraphobic man who creates, in the fastness of his Baltimore row house, masterly collages. Jeremy Pauling conquers his crippling shyness and proposes marriage to one of his boarders, Mary Tell; the story of his marriage and its breakup, his failure as a husband and his genius as an artist, is narrated with a balance and restraint that is as good as anything that Tyler has yet produced.

All of the characters in this novel are hobbled by their own limitations, and the opening pages, which are narrated by Jeremy's sister Amanda, are a *tour de force*. Amanda is an ordinary, unintelligent woman, someone who senses that life has treated her cruelly and takes her revenge in being tough and self-reliant, and in scorning the weaknesses of others, thereby pushing away the only people who might possibly love her. Here are her feelings after returning from her mother's funeral:

> When I got to the bedroom Laura was already stepping out of her dress. "Don't let the wrinkles set in that," I told her. (She tends to be careless in her personal habits.) "I suppose we'll just have to sleep in our slips and make the best of it," I said, all energy. And I took my own dress off and hung it up neatly. But then, just as I was sitting on the edge of my bed to roll my stockings down—oh, I can't explain what came over me. Such heaviness, such an exhausted feeling. As if there were no point to moving any more. . . . I know what I am. I'm not blind. I have never had a marriage proposal or a love affair or an adventure, never any experience more interesting than patrolling the aisles of my Latin class looking for crib sheets and ponies—an old maid schoolteacher. There are a thousand jokes about the likes of me. None of them are funny.

It is no wonder that Tyler felt *Celestial Navigation* to be a personal breakthrough. How to explain, then, her reversion to type with the next three novels? It is not until *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* that we find a book to compare with her earlier favorite. *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* is a family portrait, but its central, most real and moving figure is a woman not unlike Amanda Pauling, a stupid, plodding person who wages perpetual battle against a world she cannot understand.

Pearl Tull is a genteel lady, born in the early part of the century, who had more or less resigned herself to being a spinster when a jaunty, handsome salesman several rungs down the social ladder came along. The couple produced three children, Cody, Ezra, and Jenny, and then, after some fifteen years of marriage, Beck Tull walked out; his name was never mentioned again, either by Pearl or the children. Pearl, with very little money and very few wits about her, was left to bring up her family on her own.

Pearl is a loving if rigid and humorless mother, but occasionally she cracks and exposes a violent, Mr. Hyde aspect that terrifies her children.

> Which of her children had not felt her stinging slap, with the claw-encased pearl in her engagement ring that could bloody a lip at one flick? Jenny had seen her hurl Cody down a flight of stairs. She'd seen Ezra ducking, elbows raised, warding off an attack. She herself, more than once, had been slammed against a wall, been called "serpent," "cockroach," "hideous little snivelling guttersnipe." But here Pearl sat, decorously enquiring about Julia Carroll's weight problem.

It is to Anne Tyler's credit that she never once descends to proselytizing about "child abuse" or the "dysfunctional family": she writes fiction, not sociology, and her characters are far more complex than the cardboard figures of "abuser" and "victim." The fact is that the terrible and pathetic Pearl, with all her faults, tries her best; she is quite simply as good a mother as she is capable of being, and though she herself believes that her family has failed, the reader, finally, cannot agree. Pearl is unexpectedly moving as, looking at her middle-aged sons and daughter, she grieves for the tiny children of thirty years before, when she used to take them to

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the beach on holidays from which she had always been far too worried and joyless to take any pleasure. Only as she slips gently from life to death is she finally able, at least in her own mind, to connect with them:

> She remembered a country auction she'd attended forty years ago, where they'd offered up an antique brass bed complete with all its bedclothes—sheets and blankets, pillow in a linen case embroidered with forget-me-nots. Two men wheeled it onto the platform, and its ruffled coverlet stirred like a young girl's petticoats. Behind her eyelids, Pearl climbed in and laid her head on the pillow and was borne away to the beach, where three small children ran toward her, laughing, across the sunlit sand.

But *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* is finally kept from being a first-rate novel by its corny use of metaphor—the celebratory dinners at Ezra's restaurant that the family is never able to finish together are obtrusively symbolic—and by the upbeat ending which Tyler seems to have tacked on in accordance with her own tendency to dreamy optimism rather than with the book's own, much darker, truth. Several years ago, John Blades in *The Chicago Tribune* wondered whether "Tyler, with her sedative resolutions to life's most perplexing problems, can be taken seriously as a writer." This indeed seems to me to be the real question when dealing with Tyler: only in *Celestial Navigation* does she allow that some family relations must be permanently severed, that some differences must ever be irreconcilable, that sometimes the darkness in human nature blots out any hope of redemption or renewal.

Tyler's next two books, *The Accidental Tourist* and *Breathing Lessons*, were significantly less impressive than *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, and it seemed for several years that in middle age she had settled for a lucrative niche as a crowd-pleasing, middlebrow writer—with a gift, certainly, for evoking the brilliant detail, but a fatal wish to impose a wishy-washy glow of optimism over everything. Yet having reached this plateau of mediocrity Tyler unaccountably began to be called a major American talent, and was generously rewarded with prizes and kudos. People were being asked to take Anne Tyler very seriously, far more seriously than her current work warranted.

The Accidental Tourist is the story of Macon Leary, a repressed near-recluse whose ever-so-symbolic job is to write travel guides for those who hate to leave home. His twelve-year-old son has been killed; grief and self-reproach have ended his marriage, and Macon slips into a depression he isn't clued-in enough to recognize. He is rescued by another of Tyler's Life Force characters in the person of Muriel, a young woman who is noisy, clinging, and abrasive, but spunky —excruciatingly spunky. Tyler's theme, not unpromising in itself, is explained by Macon as he muses over his reasons for turning his back on the appropriate mate—his wife, Sarah—and aligning himself with the wildly inappropriate Muriel. "He felt a mild stirring of interest; he saw now how such couples evolved. They were not, as he'd always supposed, the result of some ludicrous lack of perception, but had come together for reasons that the rest of the world would never guess." Interesting in theory, yes: but in reality the only sympathy the wooden Macon inspires in the reader is due to the terrible loss he has suffered, while Muriel sets one's teeth on edge every time she opens her mouth. It's hard to give a damn what happens to either of them.

Breathing Lessons is the story of a marriage told, with the aid of flashbacks, in the course of a single day's drive. Ira and Maggie Moran, in their late forties, have reached a turning point. Their son has grown up and left home, their daughter is about to go away to college, and they are suddenly confronted with the fact that they will spend the rest of their lives alone together. During the day in question they drive to an old friend's funeral, where they see for the first time in many years all the friends of their youth and, on the way home, they visit their son's

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estranged wife and try to re-establish relations with her and with the granddaughter they are never allowed to see.

The book is neat and skillful like all of Tyler's later work, but empty at the center, for Ira and Maggie, upon whom everything depends, are nothing but the same old stock figures dug up out of Tyler's familiar bag of tricks. Ira is Mr. Still-Waters-Run-Deep, "a closed-in, isolated man," "most comfortable, Maggie thought, when he could act tolerant and long-suffering." Maggie is Tyler's version of the eternal feminine, her Molly Bloom: disorderly, fecund, maternal, impulsive, ordinary, "special." In actuality she's sub-ordinary: an infuriating woman who stupidly indulges her own eccentricities at the expense of her family.

In 1991, Tyler broke this mold and produced another really good novel, *Saint Maybe*. "All I knew at the start," Tyler has said, "was that I wondered what it must be like to be a born-again Christian, since that is a kind of life very different from mine." An intriguing idea, since despite the enormous role they play in our culture, born-again Christians are as beyond the pale as subjects for serious art as they are socially. *Saint Maybe* begins with the attractive, indeed picture-perfect upper-middle-class Bedloe family. Daniel, the adored elder son, marries Lucy Dean, a sexy but white-trashy young divorcée; after they have been married about a year his younger brother, Ian, angry at Lucy and obscurely jealous of his brother, tells Daniel that Lucy has been unfaithful to him. This leads to Daniel's suicide and to Lucy's own death soon afterward. The family is shattered: Ian, paralyzed with remorse, joins a fundamentalist church, leaves school, and devotes his life to raising Lucy's three children.

This is perhaps Anne Tyler's most adult work, in its acknowledgment that guilt, remorse, and atonement might be concrete realities and not fallacious psychological states. Though Tyler is herself an agnostic, she gives real validity to Ian's religious development, taking it beyond the range of theology into that of practical ethics. Mrs. Bedloe, distressed at the change in her son, gives the usual WASP argument against fervent piety: "Of course we have nothing against religion; we raised all of you children to be Christians. But *our* church never asked us to abandon our entire way of life," to which Ian responds, "Well, maybe it should have."

Ian's conversion leads inevitably to his social ostracism. Speaking to him, people's smiles would glaze over whenever "the bald, uncomfortable sound of God's name was uttered in social surroundings." Ian "seemed slightly out of step, so often—his jokes just missing, his churchy language setting strangers' eyes on guard, his clothes inappropriately boyish and plain as if he'd been caught in a time warp." Ian's mother exposes her own wrongheadedness when she defines her grief over her son's death and Ian's metamorphosis in terms of social class (though she doesn't use those words): "Our lives have turned so makeshift and second-class, so second-string, so second-fiddle. . . . We're not a special family any more." "Special," of course, is in fact just what the family has become; and as a nice touch of irony, Lucy's little waifs grow up to become highly successful adults—successful in terms that Mrs. Bedloe herself would understand.

Tyler's fine new novel, *Ladder of Years*, starts with an unpromising hodgepodge of *echt*-Tyler ingredients: a twenty-year marriage, a charmingly scatter-brained wife, a saturnine husband, a flight, a journey, a return. Delia Grinstead is one of the tribe of Tyler women that John Updike described as being "admirably active in the details of living yet alarmingly passive in the large curve of their lives—riders on male-generated events." Though only forty years old, Delia is strangely anachronistic, seemingly belonging more to the generation brought up on Doris Day and Rock Hudson than on the Rolling Stones—to Tyler's own generation, in fact. The youngest of three sisters, and fifteen years younger than her husband, Sam, Delia has played the child all her life and

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now, in middle age, still affects a frilly, baby-doll look.

Tyler traces the novel's conception to a moment some twenty years ago.

> Back in 1975 or so, while I was on a family beach trip, I went to the local produce stand in a T-shirt that said *One Hundred Years of Solitude*—the title of my favorite book. I was waiting in the cashier's line when a woman told me, "I would *love* that."
>
> Considering she was surrounded by children, all of them clamoring for different flavors of Sno-Cones, I knew right away what she was referring to. It wasn't my cantaloupe, or even the book; it was the hundred years of solitude . . .
>
> Who hasn't had an urge to up and leave at some point, packing no more than a toothbrush? I have been fascinated all my life by the tension between the wish to fly and the resolve to stay earthbound.

Delia, then, the ordinary, slightly ridiculous Roland Park doctor's wife, is to fulfill this not-uncommon female fantasy and abandon her cluttered existence for a stark, clean one. But her flight is not joyful or comical, as Tyler's comment, above, might suggest, for events have united to bring about a crisis in Delia's life. Her children, in late adolescence, have reached the age where they no longer really need her, and the fifty-five-year-old Sam has had his first glimpse of mortality in the form of a brand-new heart condition. More obscurely, the comfortable continuity of Delia's life is being badly shaken: the favored youngest, Delia had in fact never left home; she married her father's junior partner and the young couple continued to live with the old man. Now Delia's adored father is dead, and while she is shattered, Sam blandly goes about the business of remodeling the house and office as though he had been waiting for years to usurp his father-in-law's place.

One day in the supermarket Delia has a rather absurd encounter with Adrian Bly-Brice, an attractive young man who asks her to pose as his girlfriend in order to make his ex-wife jealous. This leads to other, more romantic encounters with him; Delia is not tempted to fall in love, but she is startled to realize that someone else sees her not merely as someone's wife, mother, or daughter but as an attractive, even interesting person in her own right. Almost subconsciously Delia begins to reassess the marriage she had always taken for granted, to feel sure that Sam married her out of self-interest rather than for love, to believe that her children scorn her and that even they, whom she has always loved so unreservedly, had somehow in growing up "become just a bit less overwhelmingly all-important to her."

Delia understands that her experience is not unique. "Didn't it often happen, she thought, that aged parents die exactly at the moment when other people (your husband, your adolescent children) have stopped being thrilled to see you? But a parent is always thrilled, always dwells so lovingly on your face as you are speaking." But Delia has lived her life by her instincts; she does not have the intellectual resources fully to understand, or solve, the problems in her marriage, which are certainly far from unusual: over the years Sam and Delia have slipped ever further into the sort of defensive role-playing that so many couples indulge in, each eventually coming to define himself purely in terms of the other's difference. Delia reflects that Sam "always got to be the reasonable one, the steady and reliable one; she was purely decorative. But how had that come about? Where had she been looking while that state of affairs developed?"

Marriage as a trap—it is a theme that has cropped up in many Tyler novels, but never with such dark implications as in this one. One of Delia's friends complains about her own situation in words with which any number of Tyler characters would heartily agree: "Funny how men always worry ahead of time that marriage might confine them. . . . Women don't give it a thought. It's afterwards it hits them. Stuck for life! Imprisoned!" Delia, a startlingly old-fashioned woman who might never have heard the word "feminist" in her life, went into mar-

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riage believing that it would be perfect, and it has taken her twenty years to realize that it is not.

This raises an interesting question in relation to Anne Tyler: what effect has the feminist movement, which played so large a role in the story of her own generation, had on her work? On the surface, astoundingly little. Katha Pollitt has noted that, with very few alterations, any of Tyler's stories could take place in the Twenties or Thirties—not only because they are not topical but because their characters seem eerily untouched by any of the revolutions, be they sexual or feminist, of the last forty years. Not only do none of Tyler's wives see themselves as feminists, they apparently do not even acknowledge that such a creature exists, or that there might be any alternative to conventional marriage save shameful spinsterhood or, as in Delia's case, rather dramatic flight.

Nor does there seem to be any more covert feminist statement in Tyler's novels. Her subject is not the bid for independence but the bridging of gaps; her characters struggle, more or less successfully, not so much to free themselves from repressive relationships as to find ways of communicating within those bonds. There are permanent separations, to be sure—Mary takes the children and leaves Jeremy in *Celestial Navigation*, Jenny flees her first husband in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*—but the norm is represented by Charlotte in *Earthly Possessions*, or Elizabeth in *The Clock Winder*, both of whom finally shoulder the burdens imposed on them by their respective families and accept the claustrophobia of married life along with its rewards. Even the absconding Beck Tull is reincorporated into the family circle he had left, so definitively as he thought, thirty years earlier.

Delia Grinstead, a creature of impulse like so many of Tyler's characters, never makes a conscious decision to leave; she simply veers off down the beach while her family is swimming and sunbathing, gets a lift in a repairman's van, and disappears not only in space but in time, for the destination she picks almost at random, Bay Borough, is a small town straight out of Norman Rockwell: "Look west as you crossed an intersection, and you'd see pasture, sometimes even a cow." Here Mrs. Grinstead takes a room in a boardinghouse and becomes Miss Grinstead, a "sombre, serious-minded woman" utterly unlike anything Delia herself has ever been; she gets a job as a secretary, spends her evenings reading in her room, and her nights in violent fits of weeping. Yet Miss Grinstead is not entirely unhappy. She takes pride in her new-found efficiency, her detachment, her intelligence. Most of all she enjoys her solitude: "She had noticed that Miss Grinstead was not a very friendly person. She hadn't developed the easy, bantering relationships Delia was accustomed to."

Tyler is very skillful at establishing a delicate balance between fantasy and reality. For the early Bay Borough scenes take the story into an anti-realistic mode: Bay Borough, as Miss Grinstead first experiences it, is a dreamscape just as Miss Grinstead herself is not a person but a fantasy of Delia's, and there are conscious echoes of *The Wizard of Oz* and *Alice in Wonderland* in these pages. But though Delia has undergone a breakdown of sorts, she has kept her sanity, and little by little Bay Borough loses its elements of fantasy, just as Miss Grinstead and Delia begin to coalesce. Indeed, Delia starts to gather "an impression of Bay Borough as a town of misfits. Almost everybody here had run away from someplace else, or been run away *from*. And no longer did it seem so idyllic."

The human responsibilities that Delia thought she could leave begin to pile on again, as she acquires friends and, eventually, takes a job caring for a small boy and his recently divorced father. Old worries and responsibilities begin to reassert themselves —"It was so easy to fall back into being someone's mother!"—and, finally, Delia is so far enmeshed with the Millers that she must make a decision: to let Joel and Noah Miller become her new family, or to return to the one she had left, with such unresolved anger, a year earlier.

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Tyler's pattern of escape and return is so well established that Delia's choice should come as no surprise. Yet there is a significant difference here; for the first time, it strikes me that Tyler herself doesn't believe in her own happy ending. There are plenty of clues planted in the text to make the reader suspect that Joel and Noah are meant to be simply another version, another face, of the Grinstead family, but there is no question that Tyler has made the Millers kinder, more attractive, and more emotionally necessitous people than the Grinsteads. Delia obviously loves Sam, but his lovableness is not readily apparent to the reader. He is a familiar, and not very appealing, type: "*I'm glad to hear it* was one of Sam's favorite responses. Along with *If you say so, Dee*, and *Have it your way*. After which he might serenely turn a page, or he would start talking with the boys about some unrelated subject." Similarly, the loutishness of adolescence doesn't go far enough to explain the singular coldness of the Grinstead children, while Noah Miller is affectionate, eager to love his surrogate mother.

Ladder of Years is essentially about facing and coming to terms with grief: in Delia's case, grief for her father, long-ago and deeply repressed grief for her mother, grief for the ideal marriage she never had and for the husband and children she will soon lose. Delia finds a way of coping with the grief, but it doesn't abate. And never before has Tyler seemed so ambivalent about the neat resolution she has imposed on her story. As in *Saint Maybe*, Tyler shows a new maturity in being content to leave some central questions unanswered: why does Delia so fiercely repress any memory of her mother? Will Sam and Delia meet on a better-informed level, or will their marriage continue to limp unsatisfactorily along?

To sum up a writer's life and work at what is essentially mid-career—Tyler is only fifty-three—can be only a tentative business, especially since Tyler has demonstrated that, while there is a rather predictable aesthetic and subject matter to which all of her books conform, she is quite capable of transcending her norm and confounding our expectations. Capable, but not always convinced of the necessity, and her weak spots are only too obvious. "As far as I'm concerned," she has said, "character is everything. I never did see why I have to throw in a plot, too." Well, sometimes she doesn't—or at least, not enough of one. Instead, she lets her characters talk on and on, in the naïve expectation that the reader will find them as irresistible as she does herself.

Yet Tyler has given us four excellent books, and may well do more. In her last two novels she has attempted to go honestly to the heart of the matter, without succumbing to the temptation of local color, histrionic characters, or easy optimism. There is every reason to suppose that she will continue to improve.

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Three poems by Gottfried Benn

translated & with an introduction by Teresa Iverson

Gottfried Benn was born in 1886 in the village of Mansfield, between Berlin and Hamburg. He grew up in another village, Sellin in Neumark, in what was then East Prussia, part of present-day Poland. He died in 1956 in Berlin. He was the oldest son, grandson, and great-grandson of German Protestant ministers. His mother, however, was of French Swiss birth. During the course of his life, he made much of the fact of this mixed parentage, and attributed his intellectual tensions to what he once called his "half-breed melancholy."

Benn wanted a career in medicine, but his father, who could not afford to send him to medical school, persuaded him to study theology and German philology instead. Benn complied for two years, first at Marburg, and then in Berlin. He nonetheless found a way into the career of his choice, enrolling, in 1905, at the Kaiser Wilhelm Academy of Army Medicine. After serving as a military doctor in World War I, he set up a private practice in Berlin as a doctor of skin and venereal diseases (commonly combined as a medical specialization in Germany). He closed his practice and re-entered the military in 1935, shortly before he was blacklisted by the Nazis.

Benn's first book was a small collection of poems entitled *Morgue* (1912), a *succès de scandale* in the Expressionist mode. These poems, which draw on his experiences as an intern working with terminally ill patients and dissecting cadavers, are characterized by explicit, naturalistic detail. "Labor Room" ("Saal der Kreissenden Frauen") dates from this collection. Although he never altogether abandoned his origins, after about 1919 Benn turned away from the more extreme aspects of his early Expressionism. "Jena," published in 1926, illustrates a very different style that appeared in his poetry during his middle and late periods, a style which, to some, has barely seemed to avoid sentimentalism. "Mountain Ash" ("Ebereschen") is a late poem, published in 1954, just two years before his death.

In addition to poetry, Benn wrote plays and, more important, prose—memoirs, essays, and published talks, short stories and novellas. He was an early experimenter in and a master of that hybrid genre, the story-essay.

While he wrote both in free verse and in traditional forms, the metrical intricacies of all Benn's poems reflect his thorough education in the Greek and Roman classics. "Jena" is written in the octet stanza with alternating lines of masculine and feminine rhymes that Benn is best known for. I have tried to make English poems that approximate the rhythms of the German originals, without being an exact metrical match. And since English is less rich in rhyme than other European languages, I have frequently allowed the half- and slant-rhymes common in English formal verse today.

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Saal der kreissenden Frauen

Die ärmsten Frauen von Berlin
—dreizehn Kinder in anderthalb Zimmern,
Huren, Gefangene, Ausgestoßene—
krümmen hier ihren Leib und wimmern.
Es wird nirgends so viel geschrien.
Es wird nirgends Schmerzen und Leid
so ganz und gar nicht wie hier beachtet,
weil hier eben immer was schreit.

«Pressen Sie, Frau! Verstehn Sie, ja?
Sie sind nicht zum Vergnügen da.
Ziehn Sie die Sache nicht in die Länge.
Kommt auch Kot bei dem Gedränge!
Sie sind nicht da, um auszuruhn.
Es kommt nicht selbst. Sie müssen was tun!»
Schließlich kommt es: bläulich und klein.
Urin und Stuhlgang salben es ein.

Aus elf Betten mit Tränen und Blut
grüßt es ein Wimmern als Salut.
Nur aus zwei Augen bricht ein Chor
von Jubilaten zum Himmel empor.

Durch dieses kleine fleischerne Stück
wird alles gehen: Jammer und Glück.
Und stirbt es dereinst in Röcheln und Qual,
liegen zwölf andere in diesem Saal.

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Labor room

The poorest women from Berlin
—thirteen kids in one and a half rooms,
whores, prisoners, outcasts—
crook their bodies and whimper.
Nowhere is there so much wailing.
Nowhere are pain and suffering
so utterly ignored as here.
Here something always wails.

"Push, woman! Do you understand?
You're not here just for fun.
Don't stretch the thing out.
Pushing also brings the shit out.
You're not here just to rest.
You've got to work. It won't come by itself."
Finally it comes: bluish and small.
Urine and feces applied as a salve.

From eleven beds with tears and blood
whimpers a painful "Salut."
From just two eyes bursts a choir
of jubilation to heaven on high.

Through this tiny fleshly morsel
all things will pass: misery and hope.
And one day it dies, gasping in pain,
twelve others still lie in this room.

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Jena

«Jena vor uns im lieblichen Tale»
schrieb meine Mutter von einer Tour
auf einer Karte vom Ufer der Saale,
sie war in Kösen im Sommer zur Kur;
nun längst vergessen, erloschen die Ahne,
selbst ihre Handschrift, Graphologie,
Jahre des Werdens, Jahre der Wahne,
nur diese Worte vergesse ich nie.

Es war kein berühmtes Bild, keine Klasse,
für lieblich sah man wenig blühn,
schlechtes Papier, keine holzfreie Masse,
auch waren die Berge nich rebengrün,
doch kam man vom Lande, von kleinen Hütten,
so waren die Täler wohl lieblich und schön,
man brauchte nicht Farbdruck, man brauchte nicht Bütten,
man glaubte, auch andere würden es sehn.

Es war wohl ein Wort von hoher Warte,
ein Ausruf hatte die Hand geführt,
sie bat den Kellner um eine Karte,
so hatte die Landschaft sie berührt,
und doch—wie oben—erlosch die Ahne
und das gilt allen und auch für den,
die—Jahre des Werdens, Jahre der Wahne—
heute die Stadt im Tale sehn.

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Jena

"Jena before us in a lovely valley"
wrote my mother from a tour
on a postcard from the banks of the Saale,
she was at Koesen in summer for a cure;
this ancestor gone, now long forgotten,
even her handwriting, graphology,
years of becoming, years of illusion,
only these words will stay with me.

It wasn't a famous picture, not classy,
one saw little that's lovely in bloom,
rough-textured paper, the kind that's pulpy,
nor were the mountains even vine-green;
to one from the country, small cottages,
the valleys were lovely, quite beautiful,
no need for color, no need for fine paper,
one thought others would see it so, too.

Probably written from a higher viewpoint,
an exclamation had guided the hand,
she asked the waiter for a postcard,
she had been so moved by the land,
and yet—as above—an ancestor gone
and that's true for all, and also for him,
who—years of becoming, years of illusion—
today sees the town in the valley stand.

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Ebereschen

Ebereschen—noch nicht ganz rot
von jenem Farbton, wo sie sich entwickeln
zu Nachglut, Vogelbeere, Herbst und Tod.

Ebereschen—noch etwas fahl,
doch siehe schon zu einem Strauß gebunden
ankündigend halbtief die Abschiedsstunden:
vielleicht nie mehr, vielleicht dies letzte Mal.

Ebereschen—dies Jar und Jahre immerzu
in fahlen Tönen erst und dann in roten
gefärbt, gefüllt, gereift, zu Gott geboten—
wo aber fülltest, färbtest, reiftest du—?

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Mountain ash

Mountain ash—not yet entirely red
from that shade, which they develop
to afterglow, bird-berry, autumn and death.

Mountain ash—still slightly pale
but see it already bunched in a struggle
announcing, half-dark, the swan-song hour:
perhaps never again, perhaps once more.

Mountain ash—this year and forever,
in pale tones first and then in red,
colored, filled out, matured, offered to God—
but where do you color, fill out, mature?

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Art

Precisionism & the dawn of American modernism

by William C. Agee

The prevailing view of American art some thirty or so years ago was that prior to the end of World War II the United States was hardly more than a distant outpost of Paris and Europe. That assumption has lately been challenged and largely replaced by years of diligent scholarship, which has often been pursued in connection with important exhibitions and their accompanying catalogues. As a result, we are now able to see that American art was more integral to the development of early modernism than was hitherto supposed. Today, it can be fairly said that even during World War I, from 1915 to 1918, New York was a major center of world art.

We were recently reminded of this and other important matters by the traveling exhibition called "Precisionism in America, 1915–1941," organized by Gail Stavitsky of the Montclair Art Museum.[1] This exhibition and its accompanying catalogue have made a significant addition to our understanding of American art in the early decades of this century. Together they clearly demonstrate that Precisionism, generally thought of as a uniquely American phenomenon, was in fact closely involved with an international art scene in which it played a key role. The current show is, in fact, the first to place the Precisionist aesthetic in the context of the whole classicizing move toward a stable, clarifying kind of art that characterized, in one form or another, much of the modern movement in this pivotal period—the years between the two world wars. At a time when we suffer from a plethora of ill-conceived and sloppily selected exhibitions, "Precisionism in America" is something of a model of curatorial intelligence.

The exhibition is larger than it seems—155 works in many media. Yet because it is so well selected, so well paced visually and intellectually, our interest is sustained from start to finish by almost everything in the show. There is an evident reason for the inclusion of every work: how often can we say that? In part this is due to a fine balance between well-known artists—Ralston Crawford, Charles Demuth, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Charles Sheeler, all painters long associated with Precisionism—and lesser-known figures such as Virginia Berresford, Henry Billings, Elsie Driggs, Charles Goeller, and Wade White, all of whom adopted both the style and the subjects of Precision-

1 "Precisionism in America, 1915–1941: Reordering Reality" is now on view at the Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio (May 7–July 4, 1995). It was previously seen at the Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey (November 20, 1994–January 22, 1995), and the Norton Gallery of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida (February 11–April 2, 1995); it will conclude its tour at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Nebraska, Lincoln (September 1–November 5, 1995). A catalogue, with essays by Gail Stavitsky and others, has been published by the Montclair Art Museum and Harry N. Abrams (160 pages, $39.95; $24.95 paper).

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ism during the Twenties and Thirties. The group of unfamiliar artists affords many surprises that point to the need for further investigation of their work. In particular, Elsie Driggs, whose intricate painting *Queensborough Bridge* (1927, Montclair Art Museum) is the show's signature work, calls out for immediate scholarly attention. It is one of the many merits of this exhibition that here, for the first time, she emerges as a distinct artist of considerable achievement.

Until seeing this show, I had sometimes found the sleek look and urban, industrial iconography of Precisionism a little too predictable, but here, seen in the context of a full survey of the movement, even the most familiar works seem fresh and surprising. The show includes such Precisionist monuments as Sheeler's *Classic Landscape* (1931, Mr. and Mrs. Barney A. Ebsworth Foundation, St. Louis) and O'Keeffe's *New York Night* (1928–29, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Lincoln, Nebraska). They are contrasted with such little-known but compelling paintings as *The Chrysler Building Under Construction* (1931, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York) by Earl Horter, a Philadelphia artist and collector, and *White Boats* (1929, Private Collection) by Henry Billings, whose art has been all but lost to us. Paintings, drawings, pastels, prints, and photographs are all amply represented and judiciously mixed, giving us the opportunity to gauge just how deeply the Precisionist current ran in American art.

The overall effect of the exhibition is to put to rest forever the notion that Precisionism was one thing and one thing only: an aesthetic born in celebration of the coming American machine age. While industrial and mechanical subjects do indeed predominate here, the exhibition presents a far wider range of subjects, moods, and themes than I, for one, had previously associated with Precisionism. Many of the works reach back into the past, depicting a fast-disappearing rural America and its artifacts. Others are Precisionist interpretations of the traditional domestic still life. The dichotomy between present and past, urban and rural, public and private, the workplace and the home is most evident in the work of Charles Sheeler, but it runs through almost all Precisionist art, as the exhibition reveals at every turn.

"Precisionism in America" opens with an exhibit on the sources of Precisionism and its earliest manifestations, which immediately makes clear many important points that we have been slow in grasping. It includes single, groundbreaking images of machines by Duchamp and by Picabia, both made in 1915 in New York City, which, together with these artists' published comments on the glories of American machinery, alerted artists to vast new stylistic and thematic possibilities. The depiction of machines, of course, was nothing new in art; the Futurists had long since appropriated urban industrial images. But until Duchamp's chocolate grinder and Picabia's exploded camera, machines had been rendered, without exception, as part of larger views; it was left to these artists—and, subsequently, to the first American Precisionist, Morton Livingston Schamberg—to extract the machine from its urban industrial setting, to isolate it as a single, autonomous image, both on the canvas and in our consciousness. Henceforth the machine was to be seen as an object in its own right, as something inherently worthy of artistic appreciation and capable of conveying authentic social and aesthetic meaning.

Further, these isolated images were not rendered in the painterly expressionism of pre-1914 abstraction. Rather they were depicted by the Precisionists in literal figuration (Schamberg and O'Keeffe) or schematic Cubism (early Sheeler and Demuth), which would serve to clarify and reveal clean, smooth surfaces. Duchamp had initiated this practice as early as 1913 in his *Chocolate Grinder* (Philadelphia Museum of Art); if abstraction was to be the predominant art, then Duchamp would subvert it with a frank embrace of old-fashioned realistic draftsmanship. This practice was accelerated and put to new uses after his arrival in New York in 1915, the year he began his famous *Bride*

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Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (Philadelphia Museum of Art), an oil-on-glass which revived the Old Master idea of the painting as a window through which we perceive reality.

It is exactly at this moment—1916—that Precisionism was born. It is also at this moment that New York became an important art center. One of the many ironies of modernism in this country is that Precisionism, with its native subjects and clean pure lines which seem quintessentially American, should in fact have sprung directly from the European lineage of Duchamp and Picabia and that most avowedly European movement, Dada. New York Dada was a purer version of its counterparts in Zurich, Paris, and Berlin—free of their bitter and caustic tone, to be sure, but nevertheless still Dada. I established this chronology and connection in the *Art News Annual* for 1968, but it is still anathema to many who long for an art history of pure, uncorrupted Americana. Certainly, the current exhibition and its catalogue are the first to demonstrate clearly the true origins of Precisionism in the context of its full development.

In her catalogue essay, Ms. Stavitsky clearly asserts the case for Morton Livingston Schamberg as the first American Precisionist. I had established the case for Schamberg in my 1982 catalogue for the show of his work at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, but this is the first exhibition of Precisionism to place him historically. Because Schamberg died at an early age in 1918, it has been assumed that he was a merely "promising" painter, one who had not attained real stature as an artist. This is not true; he had made important paintings since 1911 and was one of our significant modern artists. His machine paintings of 1916 are milestones of American modernism and they had considerable impact. There are two in the current show and they are tellingly installed adjacent to Duchamp and Picabia. We formerly thought the paintings were invented mechanical abstractions but they actually depict real, functional machines; the fact is important because it demonstrates how Precisionism from the start moved away from prewar abstraction. The inclusion of these paintings of 1916 conclusively demonstrates that the origins of Precisionism predate the 1917 works of Sheeler and Demuth, long supposed to have been the first significant works of Precisionism. Of the many possible avenues for future study suggested by the show, a retrospective exhibition of Schamberg's work is surely the highest priority.

The exhibition and catalogue are also clear on how these roots grew into the main body of Precisionist art. Sheeler's 1918 photograph of the apartment of Walter and Louise Arensberg, important collectors of modern art then living on West Sixty-seventh Street, documents the important works that could be seen there, including paintings by Duchamp, Picabia, Matisse, Picasso, Braque, and Sheeler. It also reminds us that the Arensberg apartment was an avant-garde nerve center as important as any in the world at that time. Duchamp was the reigning figure, but other Europeans—Picabia, Albert Gleizes, and Jean Crotti among them—as well as such Americans as Sheeler, Schamberg, Demuth, Joseph Stella, and William Carlos Williams joined in this salon, which was as vital and as nourishing to American art as the contemporaneous group centered at Alfred Stieglitz's gallery "291." Yet so complete has been America's veneration of Stieglitz that the Arensberg circle went virtually unrecorded until my Dada article of 1968. The artists at the Arensberg salon no doubt continued lively discussion of the pressing topics that had been central to the Sunday-afternoon salons held prior to the war at the studio of the three Duchamp brothers in Puteaux, just outside Paris. There, the machine and its impact on modern life was a constant theme. From here came Raymond Duchamp-Villon's famous 1914 statement that "the power of the machine imposes itself on us and we can hardly conceive of life without it," which even now reads almost as a virtual declaration of intent for American Precisionism.

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So, too, does his equation of the technological and aesthetic triumphs of the Eiffel Tower as the new glory of France, equal to the triumph of the great French cathedrals.

Another chief topic at Puteaux—and thus probably at the Arensbergs'—was Henri Bergson, whose ideas on time and its duration, one moment eliding into the next, so that past, present, and future are fused, permeated early modern art. They are especially evident in Duchamp's *Nude Descending the Staircase* (1912, Philadelphia Museum of Art), that icon of the Armory Show, and Duchamp-Villon's *Horse* (1914, Museum of Modern Art, New York), a sculpture in which we see the traditional image of the horse being transformed into a new machine-age image of horse power before our very eyes.

Such matters are beyond the scope of the catalogue, but it is worth noting that these ideas found their way into American art in often surprising ways. They are evident in as unlikely a painting as Sheeler's *Classic Landscape*, a painting so famous that certain of its aspects have been overlooked. Here we move through time and space via the railroad track, an age-old symbol of American progress. We move out of the dark shadows at the lower left, which bespeak a dim and unfulfilled past in the nineteenth century, into the sun and light of a new and glorious future at the upper right, a future embodied by the pristine buildings of Henry Ford's River Rouge plant glistening in the distance. This future is depicted as a pastoral scene that suggests a classical, golden age that would be re-created through American industry. Over it all there looms the towering smoke stack, rising above us just as the spires of great cathedrals do in earlier landscapes. Here the stack becomes a symbol of a new religion embodied by American industry. It is a metaphor that Sheeler himself invoked in his autobiography, and we may be certain that its origins stem from his contact with Duchamp.

The inclusion of photographs by Schamberg and Sheeler also documents just how important, and how interrelated, the mediums of painting and photography were in the development of Precisionism. The two artists had begun working together in photography as early as 1912, and the exact relation of this medium to their painting is still a central question. We usually assume that photography influenced painting, but close comparisons made possible by the exhibition force us to reverse the question: what, we ask, was the influence of Precisionist painting on photography? Much here will depend on finally determining if Sheeler's well-known photograph of the side of a barn (included, fortunately, in the exhibition) dates reliably from either 1916 or 1917. But Paul Strand's and Paul Outerbridge's famous photographs of 1923 of gleaming machine parts clearly owe their origin to Schamberg's machinist paintings of 1916.

Another important source for Precisionism is alluded to in the catalogue. Schamberg and Sheeler had long been close friends and had studied together. They both deeply admired the clarity and exactitude of Old Master drawing, especially Florentine *disegno* of the fourteenth and early fifteenth century. The two called attention to this, and Schamberg even stated that old art had been more important to him than modern, but we have not paid much attention. In their student days, Schamberg and Sheeler had traveled to Europe with the summer class of William Merritt Chase expressly to study the Old Masters. In 1908–9 they traveled together to the major museums of Italy before going on to Paris. From Giotto, Masaccio, and Piero della Francesca, both Schamberg and Sheeler learned to look beyond the fleeting effects of nature to the underlying architectonic structure of painting. In this context they joined other artists, Picasso and Matisse among them, who sought for modern art the same solid, enduring qualities found in classical and Renaissance art.

The moderns were not the first in this drive. Renoir, feeling he had "wrung impressionism dry," had introduced monumental classicizing figures into his paintings

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in the early 1880s. In the summer of 1907, Matisse, worried that his art had become too "impressionistic," traveled to Italy to study the masters, and by that fall his art had assumed a more substantial feel. Picasso's move to Rome in 1917 was surely at least partially dictated by a parallel desire to immerse himself in classical values, and it resulted in his series of monumental figure paintings of the next four years. Schamberg even made copies of Italian "primitives," which he highly valued, demonstrating a sure familiarity with the early Renaissance. Other Americans such as Peter Blume and Elsie Driggs also studied the Italian masters. This interest reflects the thinking of Leo Stein, whom we know Schamberg had met in 1908 through Walter Pach, who was then living in Europe. Influenced by Bernard Berenson, Stein believed that "sufficient art is where composition and construction coincide." No better a description of the Precisionist aesthetic could be found. In turn, both Schamberg and Sheeler admired the pure and enormously expressive line in Matisse's masterpiece *Red Studio* (1911, Museum of Modern Art, New York), which they had ample opportunity to study at the Armory Show in 1913. All this, of course, is the crux of Precisionism: clear, clean drawing of immaculate surfaces with no superfluous shapes or forms. It was to echo deeply in American art and culture, as witness William Carlos Williams's famous statement of 1944 that a poem was like a machine in that it contained no redundant parts.

Indeed, much of world art after 1916 must be seen as part of a drive to a classicizing art that would embody values of clarity, logic, and firm structure. This move is generally dated to 1918 with the emergence of the famous postwar "call to order" and of the Purism of Ozenfant and Le Corbusier. It was a drive that sought to redress the terrible destruction of the war, that would seek order, stability, and harmony on which to build a new society. At one end of this spectrum is the abstraction of Dutch De Stijl, the Bauhaus, and Russian Constructivism; at the other are the German movement of the New Realism (*Neue Sachleikeit*) and the figuration of Grant Wood and American Regionalism, another movement long proclaimed as purely American that in fact springs directly from European sources.

However, the true date for the origin of this drive is 1916, thus placing Precisionism at the very center of world developments. Nor were the Precisionists the only Americans to participate in the initial shift to a new type of art in 1916. Marsden Hartley moved from his multiple-form paintings of 1914–15 to a highly distilled format in 1916. Working in Paris, Patrick Henry Bruce underwent the same kind of shift within a single series of canvases, his great color paintings the *Compositions*, now at Yale. Neither artist could be considered a Precisionist by any stretch of the imagination, but the processes their art followed parallel to those which brought forth the first Precisionist works of Schamberg, Sheeler, and Demuth.

In Paris, the move to a more stable and ordered art in 1916 was well documented in the small magazine *SIC*, edited by the French painter and poet Pierre Albert-Birot. Bruce surely would have known this magazine. It is a source which has never been mentioned in connection with Precisionism, but which sheds considerable light on this world-wide change in the artistic climate. In the very course of the year of 1916, the magazine moved from a prewar Futurist tone to a far different position which called for a more stable and clearly constructed art. Indeed, by the end of the year the magazine assumed a tone which could indeed be called "Precisionist." Apollinaire wrote that "the war will change things . . . we will move to a simpler expression, to attain a greater perfection." Albert-Birot himself wrote that "a work of art must be composed like a precision machine." (This is an early, and may be perhaps even the first use of the word "precision" in connection with the new art.) By November 1916, the magazine could state that "the artist is going to *construct* a work as an architect makes a house," and "from mul-

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tiple emotions, he will consolidate and distill." We need to look no further than this to understand the importance of seeing Precisionism, New York, and American art in an international context. The catalogue takes a step in this direction with its inclusion of an essay by Romy Golan which is among the first, as far as I know, to discuss Precisionism at any length in relation to European art and culture of the 1920s.

"Precisionism in America" moves effectively from origins to a full-blown view of the movement as it took deep root in the Twenties and Thirties through many stylistic avenues and variations. We see how Precisionist art became broader and more literal by 1930, until at points it is difficult to distinguish from the art of, say, Grant Wood, at least in its immaculate surfaces. This of course poses another question for students of the Thirties to explore: what exactly is the relation of Precisionism to Regionalism? In this regard, I was not entirely convinced that works by Edward Bruce and Niles Spencer in the exhibition could properly be called Precisionist, but this only reinforces the importance and complexity of the question.

In addition, the show includes work by such well-known artists as Stuart Davis, not a Precisionist as we know the term, but a painter whose own move to a hard-edged, geometricizing art in 1923 surely paralleled the Precisionist aesthetic. Seeing Davis in this context certainly clarified aspects of his art in relation to the 1920s. It is exactly this sort of intelligent, wholly artistic aside that makes the exhibition so worthwhile. It is well supported by substantial catalogue essays such as Ms. Stavitsky's, whose account of the spread of Precisionism and its critical reception is excellent. This essay contains much new information, including the fact that it was Alfred H. Barr, Jr., in his lectures at Wellesley College in 1927 and 1929, who first used the term "the Precisionists" to characterize these artists as a group.

As the Precisionist style continued to spread during the 1920s and 1930s, the works of painters such as Peter Blume, Arnold Wiltz, and Henry Billings took on Surrealist overtones that recalled the hand-painted dream images of Salvador Dalí and Giorgio de Chirico. Thus, still another question comes to mind: when, and how, did Precisionism fuse with the Magic Realism of the 1940s? The exhibition also causes us to ask once again if in fact there is a deeply rooted Precisionist strain in American art that goes back to the razor-sharp line of John Singleton Copley and extends through the exacting craftsmanship of the minimalist box perfected by Donald Judd in the Sixties. In this strain we find a common American drive toward clarity, lightness, and openness, away from the weight and density of old European hierarchies.

The myriad questions and suggestions posed by this exhibition go a long way toward eroding the long-held and pernicious view that American art after 1918 was a "retreat." It wasn't: modernism evolved along new forms, but it continued apace. When we can understand this, we will also be able finally to discard the old view that American art breaks into two distinct and almost unconnected parts, pre-1945 and post-1945. This exemplary exhibition, and the sound scholarship that lies behind it, shows us that American art holds both greater continuity and a more central place in early modernism than we have hitherto supposed.

Exhibition notes

"Martin Puryear"
at the David McKee Gallery, New York.
March 3–April 15, 1995

Seven years ago, Martin Puryear's sculpture was shown in the lobby of the Brooklyn Museum; few exhibitions of contemporary art have left so profound an impression on me. The majority of installations that have occupied this space have been but frantic attempts at diverting museum visitors while they checked their duffel bags. Puryear's work, however, animated the lobby with sculptural poise, engaging viewers with its

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considerable grace and artisanship. Indeed, the exhibition heralded a sculptor of formidable talent.

Since the Brooklyn exhibition of 1988, Puryear's sculpture has been little seen in New York City. (His mid-career retrospective of 1991–92 did not travel to New York, a curatorial blooper that says more about the peculiarities of our cultural institutions than about the merits of Puryear's work.) So when notice arrived of the Puryear exhibition at the McKee Gallery, it signaled an event to be looked forward to. I am pleased to report that the four sculptures and one drawing in this recent show offered proof that the state of contemporary art is not so dreary as it seems to be.

Puryear's work is, above all, sculpture that requires no alibi. In its measured proportion and understated elegance, it can bring to mind the sculpture of Constantin Brancusi, an artist often cited as an influence on Puryear's work. Puryear has a distinct gift for sculpting with wood—his background includes working as a furniture maker—and in his hands it becomes remarkably pliable stuff. Great skill goes into shaping it, and when one notices, for example, the internal rhymes of the conjoining planks of red cedar and pine in *Alien Huddle* (1993–95), one knows one is in the presence of an artist who is also a consummate craftsman. Many contemporary artists overwork the surfaces of their sculptures and paintings, equating fetishism with authenticity. Puryear, however, is not a show-off. His sculpture possesses a forbearance that cannot be faked.

What Puryear also shares with Brancusi is a sly sense of humor. The priapic *His Eminence* (1993–95) is an homage to the relationship between sculpture and base—as well as an amiable mocking of courtliness—put over by an almost mathematical concision; its attenuated whimsy is something the Romanian master might well have appreciated. But even the best comedian has his duds, and Puryear is no exception. *Plenty's Boast* (1994–95), for instance, may have read better in preparatory sketches than in actuality; as it is, its take-off on the horn of plenty is an exercise in metaphor flatly played out.

The most interesting sculpture in the exhibition was also the most frustrating. *No Title* (1993–95) is a bulbous vessel made of wire mesh covered with tar; applied to its surface are mesh patches of differing sizes. *No Title* both fills space and is filled by it, so much so that one is impelled to look inside it. The work doesn't just hold space, however—it also encloses objects, in this case an anvil perched atop a tree trunk. These items, once taken in, make for a curious dead spot in the work—a punchline, if you will, without much punch. Their literalness almost brings the work to a halt. Almost, but not quite, for the mesh enclosure is nothing less than a sculptural marvel. As one walks around its bulk, *No Title* alternately sags, flexes, tenses, and breathes—it has an uncanny sense of life. Here Puryear achieves a rough-hewn vulnerability that is at once funny and poignant. If I, somewhat presumptuously, proclaimed Puryear an important artist on the basis of two sculptures in 1988, this exhibition, despite my cavils, does nothing to alter that opinion.

—Mario Naves

"This Path We Travel:
Celebrations of Contemporary Native American Creativity" at the National Museum of the American Indian, New York. October 30, 1994–July 30, 1995

The ponderous Beaux-Arts Custom House on Bowling Green in lower Manhattan, designed by Cass Gilbert and opened in 1907, must seem to some prospective visitors an incongruous setting, given its Parisian stylistic provenance, for the National Museum of the American Indian, a subsidiary of the Smithsonian Institution.

Once inside, however, visitors to the new museum will find the contrast between foreign architecture and indigenous artifacts less striking. Most of the Indian works on display are patently post-Columbian, dating from the nineteenth, and particularly the late

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nineteenth and twentieth century. Consequently, many of the materials used in fabricating or decorating these works, which include ceremonial blankets, mocassins, pouches, baskets, rugs, and pottery, come from non-Indian, even overseas sources. Some of the most startling and impressive objects, like sections of the massive totem poles of the Northwest Indians, could not have been made without steel tools obtained from the new settlers from Europe. And, inevitably, the most recent non-utilitarian work, including paintings on canvas, reflect influences that Indian artists have absorbed far from their ancestral lands.

There are two major reasons for the emphasis on the recent at the expense of the more truly indigenous. The first is that the bulk of the museum's Western-hemisphere Indian artifacts were assembled not by archeologists and other scholars under the aegis of the Smithsonian, but by an eccentric New York banker named George Gustav Heye. Heye, the son of an early associate of John D. Rockefeller, toured the North American reservations in the 1920s and 1930s. Falling passionately in love with Indian artifacts, he collected them in boxcar lots, even hiring mercenaries to rob graves, a practice particularly offensive to people who considered themselves at one with their ancestors. Heye also financed expeditions to Central and South America, whence come most of the older objects.

The second reason for this emphasis on the recent is that the Smithsonian, having obtained the Heye collection after complex negotiations with the surviving trustees of the Heye Foundation, recognized the importance of strengthening its ties to the Indians themselves. It was decided that, for its inaugural exhibition, the museum could not present solely a staff-selected show of highlights from the Heye collection. So the curators have supplemented their own show, "Creation's Journey: Masterworks of Native American Identity and Belief," with two others, both of them organized in collaboration with Indian artists and consultants. One show, "All Roads Are Good: Native Voices on Life and Culture," is a selection from the Smithsonian's permanent collection made by twenty-three Native American guest-curators. But it is the other show, "This Path We Travel: Celebrations of Contemporary Native American Creativity," that offers the message that the museum obviously considers most important. A collaboration among fifteen working Native American artists, this multi-media installation attempts to convey to non-Indian viewers an understanding of the spiritual, political, and religious convictions of today's American Indians.

The installation is divided into six areas, each treating a different theme in modern Indian art. There are sections devoted to "Creation," the "Sacred," the "Male," and the "Female." But the two least-expected themes of "This Path We Travel"—"Profane Intrusion" and "World View"—are the easiest to comprehend because they are essentially political and are treated with mordant humor.

One item in the "Profane Intrusion" exhibit is a full-scale mock-up of a schoolroom built by the Federal Government on an Indian reservation. Among the evidences of Washington's misunderstanding of Indian sensibility is a sign right outside the window, modeled faithfully after official signs identifying entrances to National Parks and other national set-asides. The sign reads "Alcatraz Island—National Recreation Area." Another mock-up satirizes a room in a public housing development on an Indian reservation. It is so full of standard, non-Indian artifacts that it strongly suggests that if Washington wants to help the 25 percent of American Indians who live on reservations, it should let them build their own shelters in the tribal patterns of their ancestors.

The climactic exhibit, "World View," is something else altogether. It occupies an entire room, at the entrance to which is a sign warning visitors that the squeamish should pass on by. In the center of the room a large green globe, presumably symbolizing the earth, rests on a stout pillar that brings the globe's four television screens to eye level. The screens are placed along the globe's

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equator, ninety degrees from each other. Speakers offer a sound track relevant to each screen.

One screen brings us pictures of the natural beauties of the American continent; a second offers videotaped statements from the fifteen collaborators on the exhibiton; and a third is tuned to CNN, which for much of the day entertains visitors with the Simpson trial. The fourth screen, the one that must have inspired the warning sign, horrifies us with an atom-bomb explosion, trucks struggling to carry garbage out of an immense pile, filthy water pouring from sewers, people bloodied and limbless in violent confrontations, and crying children. It is a short lexicon of disaster: the Apocalypse come true.

The point of this "World View" is clearly made: if the 250 million people in the United States lived the way the one to eight million Indians lived before Columbus, we could have the beautiful landscape without the horror and turmoil of the white man's present reality.

Accept, if you will, the assumption that Indians were indeed noble savages uncontaminated by aggressive impulses, living always at peace among themselves, and always tender toward the natural world. Is the museum then to dedicate itself to the reality of Indian art and culture, or to the mistakes and only the mistakes of white society and to the tardy repeal of Queen Isabella's sponsorship of Columbus?

Coming into view at about the same time as the controversy over the Smithsonian's characterization of the atom bombing of Japan, the "World View" exhibit suggests that the National Museum for the American Indian might be slipping into a curious quagmire of inverted Institutional Racism. It will not be a true museum of the American Indian if it considers finding fault with settlers from Europe and Africa more central to its worldview than examining the achievement of the descendants of those settlers who came to Alaska by the Siberian land bridge.

—Roger Starr

"Gustave Caillebotte: Urban Impressionist"
at the Art Institute of Chicago.
February 18–May 28, 1995

Anyone who knows anything about modernist painting can tell you about Gustave Caillebotte (1848–1894), affluent friend, sometime painting companion, and patron of many of the most adventurous artists of his day. He is best known as a collector, one with an exacting eye, whose Cézannes, Degas, Manets, Monets, Pissarros, Renoirs, and Sisleys, bequeathed to an ungrateful nation who accepted them with great reluctance, today rank among the greatest treasures of the Musée D'Orsay. What is less known is that he was a tireless promoter of the work of his painter friends, helping to organize the now celebrated group exhibitions of the young artists known as the Impressionists during the first decade of their loose association. He paid for frames, loaned works from his own collection when artists refused to contribute, courted publicity, and generally played a crucial role in bringing the art of the "New Painters" to the attention of a public slow to pay sufficient homage.

Caillebotte the painter is less known. He participated in many Impressionist exhibitions, but as someone who came late to painting, he remains a peripheral figure. His reputation rests largely on a handful of severe, elegantly constructed pictures, some of the best and most ambitious of them in American musuems: the Art Institute of Chicago's *Paris Street: Rainy Day* (1877), with its shining, wet cobblestones and solemn dance of umbrellas; the Minneapolis Institute of Arts' touching *Nude on a Couch* (1882), with the pattern of the upholstery painted far more inventively than the rather awkward nude; the Albright-Knox's charming study for *Le Pont de l'Europe* (1876) and the Kimbell Art Museum's variant of the finished composition (dated 1876–77 or *c.* 1880). The former, like the finished version (1876, Musée du Petit Palais, Geneva), is an arresting image of figures crossing the famous iron bridge over the tracks of the

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Gare St. Lazare, dependent for its drama on a shooting perspective emphasized by a diminishing zigzag of girders. The Kimbell's version, a tightly compressed, architectonic composition with a cool blue-gray palette, is quite possibly Caillebotte's best picture; the crashing girders of the bridge wall off the space, shoving the pedestrians to the edge of the painting and against the surface of the canvas, perhaps in response to Manet's radical masterpiece *The Railroad* (1873, National Gallery, Washington, D.C.), where a seated woman and a child with her back to us are squeezed toward the spectator by a row of vertical iron bars.

The Caillebotte retrospective provides a context for these paintings, setting them among a respectable number of portraits, still lifes, and boating, garden, and street scenes, as well as a good many preparatory sketches, mostly from private collections. It clarifies our view of the painter, confirming him to have been not a "marginalized" master but a talented amateur, a man who loved "the new painting" enough to try to do it himself. Trained as a lawyer, as befitted a son of a wealthy bourgeois family, Caillebotte never practiced law, but instead entered Bonnat's studio and, briefly, the Ecole des Beaux-Arts; yet, though he described himself officially as "*artiste-peintre*," he seems to have devoted as much (or more) time to sailboat racing as he did to painting. Many of his pictures seem labored, hamfisted. (A colleague with whom I saw the show suggested that Caillebotte may just not have worked enough.) He seems not to have trusted his eye or his hand entirely, but relied on elaborate, traditional preparatory studies to produce images that, despite their "transgressively" modern subjects—floor scrapers stripped to the waist, new boulevards, butchers' stalls—nonetheless aspire to a conventional naturalism. It is plain that Caillebotte paid close attention to what the truly innovative painters of his circle were doing, but he is also reminiscent of Tissot.

In his introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Kirk Varnedoe, while acknowledging Caillebotte's unevenness, suggests that the Chicago rainy street and the Geneva Pont de l'Europe, with their firm, carefully calculated structure and their speedy, Japanese-inspired perspective, are among the most original and daring pictures of their period. I'm less convinced. There *are* some startling pictures in the exhibition—mostly studies, throwaways, but a few finished works as well—in which the painter seems to have relaxed: a stunning blue and rose view through balcony ironwork that points to Matisse (and, as Varnedoe notes, to Japanese prototypes); a couple of pale, creamy, audaciously cropped "aerial" views from a window; a vigorous still life of greenish oysters and a crisp white napkin. But they have no descendents. Caillebotte had an acute eye for the innovations of his friends—he owned Manet's *The Balcony*, after all—but he seemed unable to follow up on his own ventures into genuinely new territory. As to the much-discussed presumed "alienation" and "melancholy" of Caillebotte's pictures, I suspect they are functions of his careful perspectival plotting, which tends to isolate figures rendered in "correct" proportion. (Balthus exploits this.) That Caillebotte's figures often turn away from us may have more to do with expediency than with expressive choice; his portraits clearly cost him enormous effort.

Caillebotte is often a better painter than you expect and, sometimes, an embarrassingly worse one. He's a modest talent, but a real enthusiast. Clearly, he loved playing with the big boys, and he would have been delighted with this exhibition, where his art, whatever its limitations, is presented as seriously as theirs.

"Gustave Caillebotte" was organized by the Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Musée D'Orsay and the Art Institute of Chicago. It was seen first in Paris (September 16, 1994–January 9, 1995), and, after closing in Chicago, will travel to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (June 22–September 10, 1995). A catalogue has been published by the Art Institute of Chicago and Abbeville Press (351 pages, $60; $39.95 paper).

—Karen Wilkin

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Theater

Rolling backward

by Mark Steyn

We're into reverse Platonic stages of reality now: Neil Simon, the playhouse, is on Broadway, at West Forty-fifth and dark; Neil Simon, the play, is off-Broadway, at the Union Square Theatre and packed; and Neil Simon, the playwright, is somewhere far out of sight, possibly in a row boat adrift off the coast of Labrador. If you crossed a lemming with a sloth, you'd come up with something approximating what remains of New York theater, but nothing symbolizes its stately spiral downward—the safer and safer vehicles playing to smaller and smaller audiences—quite like *London Suite*.

At one time, Simon was Broadway's most successful playwright; then, he was Broadway's only playwright; now, even he can aspire no higher than East Seventeenth Street. And what's brought him to his off-Broadway debut? Nothing bold or brave or experimental, but a cozy rehash of familiar characters and situations: off-Broadway off-cuts. Since the autobiographical trilogy, the experiment with farce in *Rumors*, the failures of *Russia* and *Jake's Women* and the aborted Gershwin show, Simon has retreated in the Nineties to what he knows best—the gag-factory good ol' days of *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*, the half-hearted musicalization of *The Goodbye Girl*. But *London Suite* is so warmed over that I can't see why the participation of the real, living Neil Simon was required: this is computerized play-making.

After *Plaza Suite* (1968) and *California Suite* (1976), we are now in a London hotel, not dissimilar to the Connaught. As with *California Suite*, there are four playlets—more extended sketches than one-acts. Also as with *California Suite*, one of them concerns Diana and Sidney, the English actress with the bisexual husband. They're now divorced, and she seems to have metamorphosed into Angela Lansbury and acquired a hit TV series in America. Sidney compliments his ex on her amazingly unlined face; "They're all tucked behind my ears now," she says. "From behind I look eighty-six." It gets a laugh, it's a good joke, but it's portable: it could have been said by some character or other in every Simon play of the last thirty years.

Diana's face may be unlined, but Simon's script is lined all over, and, unlike facial lines, they're not expressions of character. Indeed, at times Simon's *dramatis personae* seem constructed with the perfunctory individuality of those personalized junk-mail letters advising that YOU [insert full name here], yes, YOU [repeat first name here], of [insert town name here], have been personally selected for the star prize. In *Rumors*, there was a doctor with tickets for *Phantom of the Opera*; this time round, there's a Scotsman with tickets for the new David Mamet at the National. But in *Rumors*, the precision of farce-plotting disciplined Simon and kept him on course. In *London Suite*, with the same hotel-room set and the same rotating actors, you're reminded more sharply than at any time since *California Suite* that character

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remains Simon's abiding weakness: everyone talks the same and the character differentiation is mostly down to the wigs.

By the fourth playlet, about an American couple who've mislaid their tickets for Wimbledon, you begin to wonder just what Simon's doing in London. The answer seems to be: well, he's done New York and Los Angeles, so where next? If he really felt the need for a third hotel evening, what about a $20 roadhouse in Presque Isle, Maine, or a luxury Bahamian resort like Lyford Cay? But no; from the author's point of view, that sounds too much like hard work. Simon's hotel trilogy is starting to resemble Motel 6: wherever you are, it's all the same. So, apart from the one about the American husband and wife and the one about the American TV star, there's a story about an American widow and daughter. Even as a tourist's eye view of London, it seems unambitious: British hotels have Japs and Europeans, Aussies and Pakistanis. Simon's world has always been narrowly drawn—and nothing wrong with that if that's what fires him. But no previous play of his has smelled so strongly of unfelt contrivance as this.

There's an irony here: with two or three isolated exceptions, Simon's plays have never done well in the West End; London doesn't seem interested in him, so why should he be interested in London? What passes for local color is vested mainly in an unlikely literary Welshman, presumably chosen because a Welsh accent is the most obviously funny to a New York audience. Sadly, Jeffrey Jones is never really on top of it, partly because few American drama schools consider the mastery of Welsh a priority but also because Simon's dialogue hasn't caught the sing-song cadence of Cymru. Perhaps he's got Anthony Hopkins in mind for the film version.

Even Simon's line about Mamet isn't quite right: you don't have to go to the Government-subsidized National Theatre to see the play; a new David Mamet is quite capable of holding its own in a commercial West End house. *The Cryptogram* opened last summer at the Ambassadors in London, a three-handed memory piece seen through the eyes of a young boy in 1950s Chicago. Nine months later, with Mamet taking Gregory Mosher's place in the director's seat, the play hits New York, not on Broadway but at the tiny Westside Theatre. Remember *Merrily We Roll Along*, the Kaufman and Hart play about the Broadway bigshot which tells its story in reverse to show how he compromised his integrity? The Broadway bigshots have taken its lessons to heart; these days, to avoid compromising their integrity, they lead their careers in reverse. Stephen Sondheim, who musicalized *Merrily*, is a prime example: in the Fifties, *Gypsy* on Broadway with Jule Styne and Ethel Merman and David Merrick; in the Nineties, *Assassins*, a revue about presidential killers at Playwrights' Horizons, so determined to be a prestigious flop it took the additional precaution of opening during the Gulf War. This spring the *Merrily We Roll Backward* effect has been all over town: a decade ago, Mamet was on Broadway, with *Glengarry Glen Ross* at the Golden; four decades ago (and how we forget), Peter Brook was a director of Broadway musicals, staging *Irma la Douce* and Harold Arlen and Truman Capote's *House of Flowers* with Pearl Bailey and Diahann Carroll; today, we take it for granted that his natural habitat is a limited run at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Does it matter that what's a West End play in London is a Westside play in New York? Yes—because it's more than a matter of location. One of the most common complaints you hear from New York producers these days is that it's virtually impossible to get a decent off-Broadway house anymore because they're booked up with the bigshots. For Mamet's and Simon's producers, it reduces the financial risk but also the potential audience, contributing to the awful ratchet effect in New York theater. The target audience for *Annie Warbucks* doesn't really want to find itself on Thirteenth and Third at eleven at night looking for a cab. All the evidence indicates that at the TKTS booth

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the least hot Broadway show sells its tickets before anybody starts buying off-Broadway: in moving Mamet and Simon and *Annie* downtown, you further cut off what is after all a performing art from the general theatergoer, the bridge-and-tunnel crowd, the despised out-of-towners.

It's not good for the artists, either. The difference between *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat* by Oliver Sacks and the BAM stage version by Peter Brook is that the latter has drizzled Sacks's neurological case-studies with a soupy, theatrical overlay ennobling mental affliction; it's at least as sentimental as *Forrest Gump*, certainly far more than *Dumb and Dumber*. This, too, is victim art, and a familiar consequence of commercial retreat. I've lost count of the number of invitations I've had to conferences on "drama in crisis," "theater under threat," "art in danger": in a culture of grants and subsidy, theater itself takes on the character of terminal illness, hooked up to a funding drip-feed but in constant danger of being switched off; it's not surprising that, if you work in such an environment backstage, it eventually colors the themes and characters you're drawn to onstage. When American theater was a going concern, it celebrated the possibilities of America: you're going out there a youngster, but you've got to come back a star. Now, you go out there a youngster and you come back with a profound sense of society's oppression of your identity. Brook disliked what he saw on Broadway and in the West End. He chose to marginalize himself, and, when on stage he seeks to dignify those for whom marginalization is not a choice, we should perhaps read it as an attempt at self-justification and pass on.

Stoll Moss—London's answer to the Shuberts—figure that a moderately successful new West End straight play will recoup in six weeks; if it runs three months, it'll do very nicely. In New York, Neil Simon is no longer commercial enough for Broadway, nor Mamet—even though *The Cryptogram* has a cast of three. All over the world, in Japan, in Germany, Scandinavia, even Canada, they're building theaters; in Toronto, the new Princess of Wales and North York have, according to some figures, siphoned off 20 percent of New York's theater tourism. It is distasteful to discuss drama as show business, but it is a fact that American theater is now hopeless at shows because it's hopeless at business. Broadway is a protection racket stitched up between the unions and the theater owners, whose interests are not the same as the producers'. In an otherwise un-unionized society, the theater business is an un-American activity; it poses at progressive values while denying the form's greatest virtue—its ability to speak across frontiers. The theater's preferred image of itself is something like Susan Sontag's production of *Waiting for Godot* staged in the rubble of Sarajevo. But if a Sarajevo producer wanted to return the compliment and bring a play to New York, he'd find himself having to replace his Bosnian cast with Equity members and, depending which house he picked, having to pay the Musicians' Union for a non-existent orchestra. We need some metaphorical Serbs to reduce Broadway to the rubble Miss Sontag found so liberating: the best thing that could happen is if the long-threatened theater shutdown is finally provoked next season and the whole stinking edifice is brought crashing to the ground.

To see how the malign practices of the theater's muscle men infect everything on stage, you need look no further than *Arcadia* at the Vivian Beaumont; Henry Kissinger, surveying current geo-political trends, likes to joke about Adam saying to Eve as they leave the garden: "We live in an age of transition." Tom Stoppard's play begins with an image of Eden, "a painted curtain of lush, pastoral perfection," and considers another age of transition, "the decline from thinking to feeling," as one character says—or, if you like, from rational formality to romantic individualism. We are at Sidley Park, the country seat of the Coverlys, in 1809 and, simultaneously, today, where various descendants and academics are going through

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the family papers, attempting to impose order on the whims of history. The first line of the play, delivered by Thomasina, a thirteen-year-old mathematics prodigy, to her tutor, is: "Septimus, what is carnal embrace?" It sets the tone for Stoppard's structural jest—that fundamental philosophical subversions are shrugged off *en passant* while trivial romantic flutters are accorded great intellectual weight. In this respect, *Arcadia* is the ultimate Stoppard play, in which his thirty-year auto-duet between order and chaos, head and heart sings most ravishingly. The reason, I think, is that Stoppard has attempted to pre-empt in form his most irritating trait: the monumental exhibitionism. All Stoppard's work sounds like a debate with himself—because (the unspoken conclusion follows) he's the only guy in the room worth arguing with. When I read him on the page, I hear every line—the African dictator, say, in *Night and Day* defining a relatively free press as a free press run by one of his relatives—in Tom Stoppard's distinctive voice, which in its peculiar hearty effeteness is itself a Stoppardian contradiction. On the stage, though, a successful Stoppard production is like an arranged marriage, with author and cast existing in the same relationship as Katharine Hepburn's analysis of Astaire and Rogers: He gives them class, they give him sex—the author's intellectual bravura filtered through the actors' playful charm.

Arcadia is Stoppard's most determined attempt to build this balance into the structure of a play—perhaps (if this doesn't sound too banal) because he has lately been dating an actress, Felicity Kendal. (Miss Kendal is a famous winner of Britain's prestigious Rear of the Year competition and her nude scene in Stoppard's latest, *Indian Ink*, attracted extensive comment in the London tabloids.) At any rate, *Arcadia*, in both its 1809 and present-day scenes, has a continual heady sexual flirtation, a contrapuntal tease to the intellectual arguments. Here, as with Shakespeare, you stand or fall by how you speak the words. The line itself is the melody, but there is a harmonic language, too, of nuances and moods and sly winks. All this is missing at Lincoln Center.

Don't be misled by *Cats* and *Starlight Express*: few directors work as closely and as thoroughly with actors as Trevor Nunn, Stoppard's stager both here and in London. I can't believe this is the cast he would have chosen had he had a free—that's to say, non-Equity policed—hand. This is a company of posers, of coarse double-takes (Lisa Banes, Victor Garber) and flounces (Blair Brown, Jennifer Dundas). Lisa Banes's Lady Croom lacks that aristocratic carelessness, the tossing off of epigrams that doesn't care whether you get 'em or not; Blair Brown's Hannah seems to have confused a bluestocking with a ball-breaker. Everyone's working hard to hang on to those English accents, but whole phrases get swallowed and what's intelligible is arid and glib because it's just words: the supporting harmony, the sexiness of argument, is gone. I wonder how many of Lincoln Center's patrons will see past the performances to Stoppard's play; as realized in this production, these characters are neither vivid nor sensual nor compelling. At the performance I attended, the audience went in wanting to admire it: by the end, I reckon about half did, about half were wondering what the big deal was. But there wasn't the sense of elegant entrancement felt in London. If you wander down to the British Airways office on Fifth Avenue, they'll sell you one of their theater packages: five nights in London plus three shows. How odd that playgoing is an international activity but play casting is not.

When British musicals arrive in America, they're invariably re-tuned and tightened; British plays show up fatally underpowered. Brian Friel's *Translations*, revived by Howard Davies at the Plymouth, is also concerned with words: in the Donegal town of Ballybeg, in 1833, English cartographers have arrived to anglicize the Irish place names. According to Friel, the play is about language "and only language." But, as the *Playbill* cover illustrates, with a signpost showing the English "Ballybeg" and the Gaelic "Baile Beag" pointing in opposite directions, lan-

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guage—in Ireland and Quebec and parts of America, too—is about politics and identity. If you can't get the language right—not just the accents, but the rhythms and stresses—there's no play. Davies's cast flounders about in a bog of generalities: because the voices never seem an expression of character, you wind up with no characters.

In fairness to *Arcadia*, there is one moment at the Beaumont which improves on the original. Much of Stoppard's recent work—certainly *Indian Ink*—is a dance to the music of time. At the end of *Arcadia*, this becomes explicit. Having worked out the ultimate equation—for the disintegration of order, for cosmic chaos—Thomasina invites Septimus to dance, and now past and present merge as couples from each era waltz around the room. It is a strange, bewitching image from a waggish, articulate playwright, a recognition that sometimes we need to go beyond words—that if we cannot find order in history, we can find grace in the moment. This scene is far more moving than in London: American stage actors have always moved better.

The opposing tugs of heart and head are, of course, the essence of theater, fought both within shows and between them: it's at the nub of arguments about musicals versus plays. It's a futile debate, not because Broadway is no longer in the business of plays but because it's no longer in the business of musicals, either. Nowadays, every season is the worst ever—until the next one. This year, the only new musical has come from London (*Sunset Boulevard*) and the only interesting revival has come from Toronto (*Show Boat*). You can make a case, according to taste, for a writers' theater or a directors' theater or a producers' theater, but there is nothing to be said for a theater owners' theater. Drama is about movement: by the end of the evening, we are not where we were when we started. But a theater owner is in the business of buildings: plays come and go, but the Shubert and the Broadhurst are forever. I don't think it's coincidence that, as the four-wallers have usurped the role of the producer, they've inclined toward works that tend to the same condition as the buildings—fixed, static, immobile, set in concrete. The play and the musical are dramatic forms; they're being succeeded by, respectively, the one-man show and the revue, forms which are not by definition dramatic, though they certainly can be. But, invariably, the one-man show is an attempt to short-cut the process of play-making. Rob Becker's *Defending the Caveman* (Helen Hayes) exemplifies the new school of bozo theater; the couch-potato act and set—the T-shirt, the beergut, the chair, the TV—rub the audience's nose in it: this guy is even more boring than you are, and you're paying a lot more money for him. I liked the idea of *Rush Limbaugh in Night School* (Second Stage), but Charlie Varon comes on like Coleridge trying to work a backer's audition for *The Ancient Mariner*. Limbaugh is epic—he needs a play, if not a musical, if not an opera.

As for revues, *Smokey Joe's Café* (Virginia Theatre), compiled from the songs of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, has been developed by Jujamcyn's dramaturge in association with their in-house director, Jerry Zaks. "Developed," eh? Leiber and Stoller wrote "Jailhouse Rock," "Love Potion Number Nine," "Charlie Brown": rock 'n' roll rhythms combined with droll, memorable lyrics—a rare marriage in latter-day pop. So how have Jujamcyn "developed" this project? Well, the "concept" is to set it in Smokey Joe's Café, just liked every other compilation show set in a bar or café (cf. the current *April in Paris* and *Swingtime Canteen*, as well as *Blues in the Night*, etc.); they have an amiably fat black woman to sing the more sexually suggestive songs, just like every other compilation has a fat black woman who's sexually suggestive (I'm amazed that there aren't more objections to this patronizing but apparently indestructible stereotype). Zaks has drained the life and character out of these songs: he's taken the precise and made it bland. And just to make sure we don't mistake it for drama, every actor is sporting a switchboard operator's mike and headpiece down his or her left cheek. It's not good

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musically (the onstage band is lousy) or dramatically: dead rock, no roles.

We're so used to this process of dramatic airbrushing that producers now feel the need to apply it to proper dramas. Few writers can compress character as effortlessly as Frank Loesser:

> Take back your mink
> To from whence it came . . .

which prepositional pile-up tells you everything about Miss Adelaide's desire to improve herself and her need for respectability. In 1961, a decade after *Guys and Dolls*, Loesser and Abe Burrows turned *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* into a satirical fairy tale, in which the junior exec sang the big love song—"I Believe in You"—to his own reflection. And, because he believed in himself, we did, too. Des McAnuff, director of the revised revival (at the Richard Rodgers), can't quite bring himself to trust the material that much. There's plenty to admire here but there are things to regret, too. *How to Succeed* has a sly look and a funny score but it's a period piece, a world of business and sexual etiquette no longer in fashion, where status attaches (as in Billy Wilder's *The Apartment*) to the key to the executive washroom and secretaries advance only by shrewd deployment of their charms. Rather than draw us into this world and invite us to accept it on its own terms, McAnuff would rather depilate the play. So he's dropped "Cinderella Darling," the song in which the secretaries hymn a sister who's about to achieve the ultimate goal—marriage to her boss:

> How often can you fly
> From this land of carbon paper
> To the land of flowered chintz?
> How often does a Cinderella
> Get a crack at the Prince?

For 1961, this seems a reasonable point of view. If you sing it now, it can be biting or rueful or pathetic, but true to those characters at that time. I'm tired of revivals that find it easier to leave out anything difficult, or even different. I wasn't one of *Carousel*'s cheerleaders but I respect Nicholas Hytner for leaving in all the wife-beating stuff, all the speeches about how a man can hit you and still love you, and trying to make us understand how Julie could feel that. Many feminists were disgusted; some commentators said the play was now unacceptable—but who wants a theater that only does what's "acceptable"? Like Hal Prince cutting "In Dahomey" from *Show Boat*, Des McAnuff assumes that American audiences have lost the capacity to imagine times and cultures other than our own.

Matthew Broderick's boyish schemer is perfectly pitched, Wayne Cilento's Sixties dances are great fun, but I can't join in the critical hysteria. "Will turn the season on its ear!" says *Variety*. No, it won't—not even this season—because it's too scared. On the posters, the title's abbreviated to *H2$*: it looks like a formula—for a formula show. We have declined not from thinking to feeling, but from feeling to faking.

Editor's note: Back issues of *The New Criterion* are for sale at $6 each.
A list of highlights is available upon request from the Office Manager.

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The media

Faking it

by James Bowman

In the last installment of Newt Gingrich's college course called "Renewing American Civilization," which ran (and is now re-running) on the Mind Extension University cable channel, Gingrich played, for some reason still obscure to me, that crowd pleaser, that favorite cut, that "best of" gobbet from Ken Burns's hit "Civil War" show in which an actor reads the last letter of Major Sullivan Ballou to his wife over a weepy violin. Mr. Gingrich was himself not unaffected emotionally and had to brush away the tears. "I get teary," he explained simply to the boys and girls of Reinhardt College, Waleska, Georgia, who looked on in curiosity or embarrassment.

Why, I wondered, did I get exasperated rather than teary? Why, indeed, did it seem to me, who cry in movies with some frequency, ridiculous to well up to a TV show? I think it has something to do with the nature of the medium. Tears that come naturally in response to a man speaking to men are lost when a mass of producers and technicians intervene between us and the words. Or rather, perhaps, the technology requires that the producers' manipulation of emotion must remain ever on display and unconcealed by the sort of art that is customary with such relatively low-tech media as books or even movies.

By its very nature, that is, TV is shamelessly manipulative. Nothing can appear on it that is sincere and unaffected, in the old-fashioned sense, because it is constantly advertising the manufactured quality of its characteristic sincerity. From the days when announcers used to thank us for allowing them to come into our living rooms, or Art Linkletter invited us to join his "House Party," the transparent pretense of television's smaller-than-life "personalities" to real intimacy has been the defining feature of the medium. And as this fakery is taken for granted in all that we watch, people like Ken Burns and Newt Gingrich, with ideas above their stations, don't see why we should bother to be annoyed at that damned violin's reminder that someone, not Sullivan Ballou, somewhere has said: Now we're going to jerk the tears!

Nowadays, the most successful media personalities—people like David Letterman or Jenny Jones or Jerry Seinfeld—actually glory in this built-in fakery of the medium, which further limits, as we shall see, the genuine feelings which might otherwise have been invoked by something like the BBC adaptation of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The postmodern superstar, the David Letterman of Britain, is Clive James, whose latest travelogue, called "Postcard from Berlin," demonstrates (according to Ian Hislop) "that it is obviously no longer enough just to make a documentary about an interesting place. You now have to tell the story of how you made the documentary about it. And if the story of making the documentary is not that interesting then you have to tell a fictional story of how you might have made

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the documentary about the place. Thus Clive James tells us that he was hoping to cruise round Berlin in a Mercedes but they gave him an old Trabant instead. Would you believe it?"

Meanwhile, our own David Letterman was put in charge of that festival of fakery, the Oscar ceremony. In a rather extravagant assessment of the significance of this meeting of man and moment, Jessica Teich, writing in *The Washington Post*'s "Outlook" section, claimed that

> Letterman's triumph announces a new kind of pop-culture formalism, a contempt for content. Dave's show is now only about the show. Every interview seems to focus on how the interview is going. He'll even ricochet appraisals off his guests. He risks nothing. He sees everything . . . Like other geniuses of mass culture —John Hughes, Stephen King—Letterman alludes to darker emotions: disenfranchisement, bitterness, even rage. But Letterman effaces these emotions, to evade their consequences. He hints at criticism, even judgment. Then he walks away.

There may be something in this, but an attempt elsewhere in her article to draw a parallel with Republican political hegemony does not come off. Moreover, she clearly gets it wrong when she says that,

> in general, Dave's genius is for containing, neutralizing guests. He has an almost fanatical desire to cancel them out. He does so by kidding their accomplishments or, perhaps, their pretensions. When he's done, they have ceased to seem unique. Dave succeeds in scaring off the real life of his celebrities. He can make them seem less vivid, less secure. By making the stars seem ordinary, he flatters his audience. "See," Dave is saying. "These big shots are just like us." Letterman reassures his viewers that having nothing, being nothing, is okay, even popular. He makes powerlessness pleasurable.

This is to take the stars too much at their own valuation. The point of Letterman is that he is able somehow to deflate the absurd celebrity mystique without being offensive about it. So far from "scaring off the real life" of his guests, he exposes the pretense that what the *People* magazine-reading public knows about them has anything at all to do with real life. It is the Hollywood hype machine which, for very good reasons of its own, has scared off real life. Letterman simply reveals the obvious.

Even he, however, was no match for the massed forces of phoniness on Oscar night. You could see why he was a natural choice to take charge of a show that had turned into a parody of itself long ago, and there were moments at this year's ceremony when Letterman played effectively on the predictability of its posturings. He introduced Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon, who, in true Academy tradition, were first barred and then unbarred from the presenters' ranks after a political outburst last year, by saying: "Pay attention. I'm sure they're pissed off about something." And it was also a nice touch when he stage-whispered to the "Best Actor" for two years running and a young man clearly heading for the poseurs' Hall of Fame, Tom Hanks: "Would it have killed you to wear a tie?"

But the reflexive posturing, the sentimentality, the intellectual vacuity of the evening were too much even for Letterman to overcome, and this year's bad cause, the federal government's support of the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities, was well and truly plugged, beginning with an impassioned speech by Arthur Hiller, the president of the Academy. He introduced the ceremony with a plea for the endowments, whose relevance he attempted to establish by citing the money they spend on preserving old films. Martin Landau also mentioned them, more gratuitously, in accepting his award for Best Supporting Actor: "Let's keep the NEA funded and healthy," he urged before being hustled off the stage for having taken more than his allotted time. He also wanted to share with the world the news that his sister "is fight-

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ing a battle against leukemia, and winning."

Landau was one of several who mentioned the NEA, or wore as lapel decoration two 32-cent stamps meant to represent the endowment's annual cost per taxpayer. Even PBS got a plug from one of the winners of the award for Best Live-Action Short Film, who said that her inspiration had been taken from a National Public Radio report that one in three teen suicides is gay. Here was a person Making a Difference—on behalf of those "who feel they don't fit in"—and thus one of those spectres of righteousness at the annual feast of self-indulgence which help to make it into something more than that—into a feast of self-congratulation as well.

Jamie Lee Curtis was one of those who were moved on this occasion to bring along certification of their political bona fides when, in providing a summary of the awards for scientific and technical achievement, which had been given earlier, she paid tribute to "all the men and *not one woman* who won." This was greeted by nervous laughter, as if the audience were not sure if she was making a joke but fervently hoped she was. Maybe she wasn't sure either. But if it *wasn't* a joke, the politics of it were indisputably correct. The Academy could consider itself warned that technical achievement, like everything else, could become a political issue at any time.

But the joke was part of the warning—as it always is on television, where playing it straight would be disastrous. Not recognizing that television is all a joke, that "just fooling" is structurally a part of the technology, is one of the hazards faced by those who play the celebrity-for-a-day game on the daytime talk shows. Or so one of the latter, the "Jenny Jones" show, found out in March. In an ultimately unbroadcast session, Miss Jones introduced one Scott Amedure to one Jonathan Schmitz as his "secret admirer." Shortly thereafter, Schmitz shot and killed Amedure. Even such a productive lifetime employee of the compassion industry as Ellen Goodman recognized that

> talk shows in the 1990s are like quiz shows in the 1950s. The old quiz shows tricked viewers into believing they were witnessing the real thing, brains in action. The new talk shows trick viewers into believing they are watching real emotions in action . . . The TV match made between a "secret admirer" and the unwilling, unsuspecting object of his affection was as rigged as any quiz show. It was rigged against real life. Rigged to treat emotions like entertainment.

You mean emotions *aren't* entertainment? Boy! She must not watch much TV.

The trouble with entertaining emotions, however, is that they come from a very narrow range of the spectrum of human feeling. In fact, prurience and embarrassment just about cover it. For not only daytime talk shows, but also the most popular primetime sitcoms thrive, like particularly unimaginative adolescents, on these two almost alone. I have remarked before on the adolescent humor of "Seinfeld," a show that I loathe and detest yet occasionally watch as a way of confirming my low opinion of television generally. Not only are there joke sequences which consist entirely of things like Kramer's announcement that he isn't wearing any underpants and the inevitably prissy Seinfeld's embarrassment expressed in double-entendres, but everything about the show, even Seinfeld's squeaky, pubescent voice, is designed to stress the attractiveness of prolonged adolescence.

The episode broadcast on April 7, for example, began with Seinfeld's giggly anecdote about dating an artist's model who regularly posed in the nude but whom he never got to see naked. Talk about irony! In the course of telling it, Seinfeld absentmindedly picks up a pecan which his date has spat out and puts it in his mouth. Horrified, George (Jason Alexander) points out to him what he has done. Seinfeld makes gestures of revulsion. More teenage, gross-out humor. His date gets angry with him and says: "I'm sorry you find me repulsive." Later, when he is forced to stay with her because his apartment is being fumigated, he

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realizes he has forgotten to bring a toothbrush. She invites him to use hers, and he cannot do it. She throws him out.

Meanwhile, George is smitten by the girl he had taken on their double date and asks Elaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus), who takes an art class with her, to "find out if she likes me."

"Find out if she likes you!" she says. "What are we? In high school?" Guffaws of laughter.

She may well ask, however. For, in fact, she does ask. The girl. As they are sitting in art class. "Do you like him?"

"Yeah. He's totally cool."

"I mean, do you *like* like him." But just then the teacher comes around and orders her to spit out her chewing gum.

Like most of the humor in this show, it is not verbally clever or visually striking, nor has it got the broad appeal of slapstick. The nearest thing to it is female impersonation: the entire content of the joke lies in the situation—the man dressed up as a woman or the grown-up behaving like a teenager. But the female impersonator is also, usually, expected to tell a few jokes or do a comic turn. The comedy in "Seinfeld" which is not dependent on the situation is mostly confined to the star's very brief monologue at the beginning of the show, which is brought in as if to reassure the audience that everything that follows is just a game of dress up, and that Seinfeld has earned the right to play the hobbledehoy by telling a couple of real jokes.

That may be regarded as a postmodern touch, but it is just your standard attempt to cash in on the success of this ghastly show which has produced, this season, one to follow it which is just like it. The situation—i.e., the putatively funny bit—of "Friends" is exactly the same, though the people are a bit younger. The episode broadcast on April 7 began with the gang of twentysomethings arguing about whether they would prefer to be Mr. Peanut or Mr. Salty. What a laugh! One young man talks of the wonderful first date he had the night before, of how he could "be himself" without playing games.

"So have you called her?" one of the women asks.

"What? And let her know I care? Are you crazy?" he says.

"Oh, don't be so testosterone-y," says another of the women.

"Which, interestingly enough," subjoins the designated wit of the company, "is the *real* San Francisco treat." [Paroxysms of laughter]

The plot turns on one of the women's getting back together briefly with an old boyfriend, a dentist, whom she once left at the altar. Although he is now engaged to her best friend, she yields to the apparently irresistible temptation to resume coital acquaintance in the dentist's chair. Subsequently, the two women each discover that he slept with the other while engaged to her, and they confront him with all the outraged innocence of schoolgirls. The humor here lies in the fact that the friend suddenly drops the girlish indignation and announces that she is going to marry him anyway—because she wants to be the wife of a dentist. Ha ha. See, it was only an act. Really, we are all wonderfully cynical and worldly-wise adults behind our adolescent poses.

Meanwhile, the others are being spied on by a neighbor with a telescope. One of the young men announces that he doesn't like this because "I feel I can't do stuff."

"What kind of stuff?" says one of the women with a leer.

"Will you grow up?" says the boy. [Indeed, will any of them grow up?] "I didn't mean sexy stuff—just things like cooking naked."

"You cook naked?"

"Just soup, toast. You know: things that don't splatter."

There follows an ecstasy of merriment. Of course, it develops that the peeping Tom is really a peeping Tammy who endears herself to the entire company by complimenting them on their looks. Ha Ha. What a laugh! It is a perfect synecdoche for the narcissism with which the "Seinfeld"-type comedy is saturated. After a commercial for a home pregnancy test (I imagine some young,

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urban, single female pathetically assuaging her anxieties about "an unwanted pregnancy" with the forced hilarity of these eternally childish "Friends"), we return in closing to the debate about Mr. Peanut and Mr. Salty, the former winning the nod because he is such a snappy dresser, although it is rumored that he is gay. "Did you just '*out*' Mr. Peanut?" the designated wit asks, to the usual cachinnations. It is a truly Warholian moment.

It also suggests the reason why it is never a good idea to entrust anything serious to televisual presentation, even when it is carefully prepared by David Lodge and well acted by the likes of Paul Scofield, John Mills, and Tom Wilkinson, who did a very creditable Pecksniff in the BBC adaptation of *Martin Chuzzlewit* on "Masterpiece Theatre" last month. It was especially impressive, the way that pains had been taken to match actors to the original illustrations by "Phiz" —right down to the high-arched bald dome of Tom Pinch (Philip Franks) and Mr. Pecksniff's wedge of even higher hair. But the hair and the costumes, as so often in these cases, were really the high point of the production.

It is not just that Lodge and the director, Pedr James, were forced to prune radically the lush thickets of Dickens's language, though of course they were, or that vast tracts of Dickens's drama, including virtually the whole of the American episodes, are now seemingly unproduceable. It's that *all* of it is unproduceable, in a larger sense, because of the limitations placed on it by the nature of the medium. As I noticed last year when the showcase BBC adaptation of the season was of *Middlemarch*, these limitations are particularly stringent in the case of Victorian novels which attempt (as most Victorian novels do) to come to grips with serious moral issues.

Thus it is typical that when we first make the acquaintance of the televisual Mark Tapley, who began life as the most memorable apostle of cheerfulness in all literature, he is looking miserable beyond belief. Essential to the novel's dramatic structure, he is reduced in the television version to a walk-on, a mere water-carrier for young Martin Chuzzlewit, whom he chooses to serve for no discernible reason. As with *Middlemarch*, the adaptors have done tolerably well with the wicked and the foolish and the hypocritical characters but disastrously badly with the good ones. Satire of the former seems to us, I guess, a self-evident artistic end in itself, and the good and decent characters are reduced to caricature or minor status because we don't believe in them anyway.

Interestingly, the only uncompromising thing about the production is Sarah Gamp (Elizabeth Spriggs), who is rendered so perfectly Dickensian that she is almost completely incomprehensible. This is probably sensible, as to make either the humor or the accent more accessible would probably detract from her authenticity without any corresponding gain in hilarity. Generally speaking, in spite of the stress placed by the press materials for the production on the "farcically funny" quality of the story, there are few to no bellylaughs and scarcely more in the way of chuckles. The adaptors have set about their work with a grim determination to make everything look as authentic as possible and not to let the novel's language and its multiple meanings to get in the way of the characteristically smug modern audience's appreciation of the soap opera.

Lodge is quoted as saying: "I think Charles Dickens would be writing for television if he were around today. He probably would have gone to Hollywood by now. He liked the serial form, and would have loved the possibility of reaching a huge audience and the sense of power over it. He had a terrific interest in show business." Lodge himself is interested in that which can be extracted from the novel which will preserve its essential character—namely its ability to draw "a huge popular audience." *Martin Chuzzlewit*, he says, referring to its original, serial appearance, "would have been received very much as a soap opera is today." Which is why, presumably, he labors to con-

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vert it into a soap opera. You can't say that he didn't warn us!

There are, it is true, some ambitious satirical touches—and even sporadic outbursts of goodness in the final two episodes. Tom and Ruth Pinch's escape from the households of Pecksniff and the wealthy brass and copper founder, respectively, and the setting up of their own, has some of the genuine Dickensian glow of moral accomplishment about it, as does the return of Young Martin (Ben Walden) from America in humbled condition and the final confrontation of Old Martin (Scofield) with Pecksniff before the whole family assembled. But in general, the bad guys are much more prominent and, like Milton's Satan, much more interesting—with the difference that, unlike Milton's Satan, they are only interesting as subjects for exposure and humiliation.

Even exposed and humiliated, however, they are bound to look vital and engaging compared to the good guys, of whom only Pinch survives with anything like his original importance intact. Westlock (Peter Wingfield) is all but inert, Chuffy (Mills) is a comic grotesque, and Mark Tapley (Steve Nicolson) has been written out of the story except as a lackey. This last deprivation is particularly significant, because working-class goodness, especially of that curious, Sam Weller kind which converts all the V's to W's and goes in for the picturesque, seems patronizing to us. Of all the species of goodness now unfortunately endangered, none is so rare and near to extinction as the loyalty of a servant to his master.

The bad guys, by contrast, fall into readily assimilable categories: Pecksniff the hypocrite, Anthony Chuzzlewit (also played by Scofield) the miser, a collection of blood-sucking relatives hoping to be legatees, a few wicked capitalists—who, by convenience, also happen to include all the aforementioned—and that now conventional monster, the spouse abuser, Jonas Chuzzlewit (Keith Allen). It is remarkable that the last named is made to appear not half so monstrous when he attempts to murder his father as when he twirls, figuratively speaking, his moustache and says: "Ecod, milady, you shall pay for this when we *are* married" or "Because you made me bear your humours once, now I'll make you bear mine."

For a British audience, presumably, this kind of contemporary melodrama needs no further explanation, but Russell Baker, the host of "Masterpiece Theatre," was made uneasy by even the phantom of the novel's American episodes, which were almost entirely lopped off of the TV adaptation. With a truly inimitable banality, he told viewers after Episode Three that "some of his [Dickens's] satire seems plain cruel, but much of it was probably dead on target—about that *long-ago* America." I guess it's nice to know that the PBS audience may be presumed to retain enough of a vestige of patriotism to bridle at an implied slur against their country *not* so long ago.

But Baker's principal task, like that of so much of PBS's programming and virtually all of its self-promotion, is first and always to confirm the audience in its sense of its own moral superiority. *They*, after all, cannot bear the stigma for that "long-ago America," anymore than they can for "Dickensian" social conditions in Britain. They may applaud Dickens's censure of America's antebellum schizophrenia about freedom and slavery even as they patronize him for being a hypocritical Victorian himself. After the last episode, the reliably smug Mr. Baker launched into a tortured and incomprehensible meditation on why Dickens relied on murder and suicide in his plotting—because he was "a creature of the Victorian age" wherein "sex cannot be a solution to anything." Instead, "murder and violence had become the solution, even to comedy," he said. "Somebody has suggested that, to the Victorians, murder was cleaner than sex."

To be fair, that kind of nincompoopery is all Baker's, not Lodge's. But it is instructive to look at the way in which Lodge concludes his adaptation, with Tom Pinch's words to his sister Ruth (Cornelia Hayes O'Herlihy) on his unrequited love for Miss Graham (Pauline Turner):

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> You think of me, Ruth, and it is very natural that you should, as if I were a character in a book, and you make it a kind of poetical justice that I should by some impossible means or other come at last to marry the person that I love. But there is a higher justice than the poetical kind, my dear; I don't grieve for the impossible.

As a postmodern closing, this is pretty perfunctory—a mere flourish by which the author pretends for just a moment to be asserting, in the teeth of the evidence, that Pinch is *not* a character in a book and that somehow we are watching real life. Both the televisual frame and the period costumes destroy this illusion the instant it is created. But in the novel it has a more subtle purpose. The corresponding passage there occurs much earlier in the story. It reads very much like the above, up until the last sentence, where, instead of the starkly televisual moral about not grieving for the impossible (not an un-Dickensian sentiment by the way), there is the following:

> "But there is a much higher justice than poetical justice, my dear, and it does not order events upon the same principle. Accordingly, people who read about heroes in books, and choose to make heroes of themselves out of books, consider it a very fine thing to be discontented and gloomy, and misanthropical, and perhaps a little blasphemous, because they cannot have everything ordered for their individual accommodation. Would you like me to become one of that sort of people?"

It is hard to exaggerate the richness of this passage in its context. Tom in his quiet and humble way counterposes his own steadiness and constancy against the grand dramas of sin and repentance acted out among the Chuzzlewits, refers discreetly to the still self-dramatizing Martin who has just left the room, and expresses what looks to our jaded postmodern sensibilities like a naïve but rather noble confidence in literature's ability to transcend the merely literary and reattach itself to life. It is very brave to portray a literary character in the act of renouncing his own literary existence in favor of "a much higher justice than poetical justice."

And what could that be? we wonder nervously.

All of this is lost in the TV version, of course—not through any fault of Lodge's but because, paradoxically, it is an innately literary point—besides being all but incomprehensible to modern habits of thought about such things. By abbreviating it and sticking it on the end, however, Lodge accomplishes another kind of paradox: he makes his drama the vehicle for the modern derivation of a resoundingly stereotypical Victorian moral, wrenched by violence out of a much more subtle and even modern Victorian original. The ironies are well worth savoring—though they are not unfamiliar to regular TV viewers.

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Books

The return of Emile Zola

by Daniel J. Silver

In 1908, six years after his death, Emile Zola's remains were exhumed from their quiet resting place in Montmartre and transported to the Pantheon, where the author of *J'accuse* was to neighbor his early hero, Victor Hugo. It had seemed only right, at least after Zola's Dreyfusard ally, Georges Clemenceau, had taken over the reins of the Republic, to cede to the great man the glory that was his due. Thus was foreshadowed Zola's later fate, which he suffers to this day—that of the national literary hero, a figure of deadly boring respectability. No one can doubt the courage of his stand against xenophobic nationalism, nor fail to honor his contributions to literary realism. But, frankly, Zola could do with a lot less reverence and more honest recognition of the gifted guttersnipe he often was.

How can we breathe some life back into Zola? The reader could do no better than plunge into Frederick Brown's excellent new biography, which gives us the richest and most well-rounded portrait of Zola to date.[1] Professor Brown, a veteran observer of the French literary scene, has made good use of a recent edition of letters that fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge about different stages of Zola's life. But more fundamentally, Brown has drawn a complete and elegant picture of the social and political milieus in which Zola was steeped.

The author of *J'accuse* did not suddenly hatch from a shell as a master polemicist, but had been trading blows in the sport of journalistic invective for decades, showing a perverse tendency to attract trouble. And yet Zola was in many ways a diffident and shy person; in fact, until the final stages of his career he was too burdened with stage-fright to make public appearances. Thus, Zola's personality has been something of a puzzle, and while Frederick Brown does not "solve" it all for us, he goes a long way toward making sense of Zola's motives.

The reader should be forewarned, though, that at eight hundred pages the book, if extremely readable, is a bit of a long march; it is probably best savored in measured doses. It should also be noted that Brown feels obliged to provide lengthy synopses of Zola's many novels, which drag down the narrative of Zola's life and ultimately seem unnecessary. It is also disappointing that Brown apparently takes Zola's greatness so much for granted that he seems to feel no need to provide aesthetic commentary on Zola's qualities, or to justify the glory conferred upon him.

That having been said, Brown provides us with an extraordinary wealth of historical information that serves not only to illuminate Zola's life but to portray his age in wonderful detail. And not the least of the book's pleasures are Brown's sure-handed, compact portraits of Zola's peers, such as Cézanne, Flaubert, the brothers Goncourt,

1 *Zola: A Life*, by Frederick Brown; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 888 pages, $37.50.

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and Turgenev. Because Brown's Zola is portrayed very much as a man of his time—though with no loss of individuality—he is happily a man for our time as well.

Zola's course through life was set by two imperious men: his father and the Emperor Napoleon III—the one absent too soon, the other hanging on too long. Zola *père* was born in Italy as Francesco Zolla, which became François Zola after he emigrated to France. The elder Zola was trained in mathematics and took up civil engineering; he worked on several grand public projects, including the construction of railroads. But his masterpiece was to be a dam across the Infernets gorge near Aix-en-Provence, which was to furnish water to drought-stricken farmland in the region. It was also supposed to be a ticket to fortune, as he had invested heavily in the stock of the company set up to finance this immense project. Trouble is, François contracted pleurisy and died in 1847 before the project was completed.

The results of this catastrophe decisively shaped his son's outlook. Born (in 1840) to the expectation of bourgeois entitlement, young Zola was faced then with continuous poverty. His mother felt that she had been cheated out of her share of the capital investment, and tried numerous, fruitless legal adventures to realize her dream of revenge and fulfillment. Zola thus inherited a legacy of failed hopes and of paranoid vengefulness—fueling at once his own feverish drive for success and a curious persistent fear of losing everything the next minute.

Though his mother failed in her efforts to win back a share of fortune, she was successful in appealing to the city fathers of Aix, in the name of her husband, for a scholarship for her son, who was thus able to attend the otherwise unaffordable Collège Bourbon. There, Zola ran into the sons of parvenu peasants, who were there to be given some social gloss with education but often proved to be just bullies; painful as this was, Zola received recognition for having more than perfunctory literary talents. But what was to last in his mind were the friendships he formed with other young sensitive souls: Paul Cézanne and Jean-Baptistin Baille (later to become a wealthy civil architect). Schoolmates dubbed the trio "The Inseparables"; they reveled in country excursions together, able to break out of the prisons of school and provincial Aix to dream of romantic glory. In a lovely, lyrical passage, Brown describes these idyllic moments:

> Five miles up the Bibémus road and high above Aix he could encompass it all: an immense sky with sunlight glinting off the red earth, pine trees braced in grotesque postures against the mistral, chalk hills cupping a lake formed by the dam that finally stood complete eight years after its architect's death . . . When game season came they packed guns, though no one among them could shoot straight . . . Their pleasure lay rather in the jaunt through lavender and gorse, in the expectant quiet of the hunter's blind, the crunch of chalk dust underfoot, the mutton roasted on a spit, the poems unfit for academic consumption of Hugo and Musset, which they declaimed to one another. Night would often overtake them before they saw Aix again and reduce Mont Sainte-Victoire to a spectral presence; its great limestone crop kept constant watch over the vagabonds, aligning and crowning every point of view.

But this idyll was to come to an end, as the Zolas traveled to Paris—his mother's infinitely deferred lawsuit (as Brown notes, like Dickens's *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce*) having changed jurisdiction to the Prefecture of the Seine. Through another gracious intercession, Zola was entered in the lycée Saint-Louis, where he was to continue his studies—but in what? He was torn between his father's interests in science and his own nascent literary aspirations—which his mother was banking on to evolve into a legal career, the better to help her ongoing suit. As it turned out, whether from fear or bad luck or laziness, Zola failed his *baccalauréat* exam twice, leaving him sort of educated but without a degree that would have paved his way into the higher civil service or law.

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Living with his mother in a variety of Parisian hovels—the intimacy with which would later inform his exceptional novel of working-class life, *L'Assommoir*—Zola managed to find work in the customs bureau but couldn't stand it; he quit, only then to bum around, living from hand to mouth. His head began to swell with literary ambitions, to counter the embarrassment of his means. Exposed daily to the hot-house cultural swamp of the left-bank demimonde, he absorbed the rich but dangerous brew of ideas propounded by various aesthetic and political radicals; he also met his first *grisette*, and had his first affair.

This new access to "manliness" coincided with his first serious takes on an aesthetic philosophy. In the air was a new set of physiocratic doctrines, emphasizing the atavistic, animal nature of man, and touting scientific realism as a tool for advancing, of all things, an artistic program. All of this appealed to Zola, in part because these ideas were promoted at the expense of academicism; for this unmatriculated young man, new ways were being suggested of artistic striving that rejected the scholastic culture from which he was barred. It was no wonder, then, that Zola should come to champion the artists who would exhibit at the Salon des Refusés—those rejected by the Academy. His later call for "naturalism" in literature, and his ideas for fiction based on the domination of man by physical forces and emotions were already beginning to form in this young bohemian *flâneur*.

Still, as the good physiocrat would know, dreams and ambition must be fueled by bread. Zola was then to stumble upon a seemingly unpromising job that actually was to spell out his future. He became a stock boy in the mail room of Paris's leading publishing house, Hachette. Someone noticed that the young man was clever with words, and he was promoted to the advertising department, where he improved the company's way of publicizing books. He got to read and digest most of the esteemed writing of the day, and then rubbed shoulders with the authors. In this way, as we would say now, Zola was able to "network" among the most influential writers and editors. Meanwhile, it was a boon time for newspapers and journals, and Zola capitalized; he wrote about art and fiction, while attempting his own forays into the novel.

But his greatest stroke of good fortune was still to come: his meeting Georges Charpentier, an ambitious entrepreneurial publisher, who was to strike up a lifetime friendship and collaboration with Zola. It was at this house that Zola was able to realize his ambition—following the model of Balzac—for an integrated series of novels, all tracing the lineage—and inherited foibles—of two intertwined families: thus, the Rougon-Macquart cycle. The animating concept for the series came from physiocratic doctrines he had imbibed for years, which smacked of the kind of scientific work that, in a mutated and vicarious fashion, would echo the dreams of his absent father. But there was a dimension of shrewdness here as well: Zola thought the gimmick of an evolutionary series about families would be a good marketing ploy, and would attract curious readers. It seems he was right up to a point. The early novels of the series did only modestly well, but Charpentier, ever loyal, kept faith with his promising author.

The faith was richly rewarded with *L'Assommoir*, which caused a sensation that led to tremendous sales. Zola set out to record Parisian working-class life in an unprecedented way, using street argot and dialect very liberally, both for the dialogue and for the indirect speech of the narrative voice, reflecting the characters' thoughts. It is, indeed, a remarkable achievement in the history of the novel, as Zola manages to maintain the reader's interest without any reflective characters; the "heroine," Gervaise, is probably the least sentimentalized, least romanticized woman character in fiction still to elicit the reader's sympathetic engagement. His detractors said that he merely pushes our faces into the muck, that he had a fascination with squalor for its own sake—at least among the more conservative critics,

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who did not take to the new realism or naturalism. But Zola got more trouble from the Left, which felt betrayed by this republican's seeming attack on the morality of the workers, as if he set out to prove the theories of inherited degeneracy with which the bourgeoisie kept the lower classes at bay, and justified their own neglect.

Degeneracy was, indeed, very much on Zola's mind, but not with the intent of impugning the workers; it was part of Zola's temper to rail against the mediocrity of the age. He just wasn't prepared to call things by the wrong names to satisfy a political program. But as was to be proved in his next cause célèbre, *Nana*, and again in *Germinal*, his greatest target for opprobrium was the blinkered, smug bourgeoisie, which had grown fat on imperial largess and complacency. Here Brown describes the mood of Zola's occasional journalism at the time he was formulating the plan for his great novel cycle:

> Along with Dumas *fils* and the Goncourts, Zola waxed apocalyptic on the topic of degeneracy. His causeries abound in lurid anecdotes that demonstrate how France had become a nation devoid of pride, where men of high estate groveled before women of low repute. Obsessed by *la bête humaine*, he saw it consuming patrimonies, loosening family ties, tearing moral fabric, cheapening life altogether. His *bête* held sway over the moribund Empire like a nihilistic force that clouded memory and induced those born with noble patents or expectations of wealth to forget the past or bankrupt the future. "Ah! How many sinister dreams unfold in secret, how many men there are who cast off their black habit as if it were a mere costume, roll on the carpet like a dog, and beg for punishment!" he cried, with an image that was to become a major dramatic moment in *Nana*.

Charged as Zola's language was in his polemical fervor, this allegorical expression was swallowed up by his literal enactment of this scene of masochistic debasement in *Nana*—the story of Gervaise Macquart's voluptuous, precocious, promiscuous daughter, who was to become the courtesan du jour and cynosure of lust in an only slightly fictionalized social swirl of the imperial haute bourgeoisie. With its more than frank sexuality and its outrageous depiction of the decadence of the wealthy classes, the novel was, of course, an immediate, scandalous hit. Some, like Henry James, who had admired *L'Assommoir*, thought *Nana* much too mannered, as if Zola were playing to the cheap seats with sensationalism. Perhaps there was some truth in this judgment, but Brown's account suggests that Zola had calculated his direction long in advance and was not just trying to top himself.

It was in *Germinal* that Zola gathered to greatest effect all of his descriptive powers. The novel's subject, a strike at a coal mine, was suggested to him by someone else, but he seized on it to provide an incendiary overview—yet with a tight dramatic focus—of the social and political currents of his time, which seemed close to forming a whirlpool that would catch hold of the whole of French life and pull it down. There is a curious irony created by the recent movie adaptation of the novel, which strives for realism through spewing about plenty of mud and grime, yet is really a reverent redaction of a truly savage novel. Though it is common to complain about adaptations of classic fiction that the inner nuances of characters' subjectivity are lost, here it is the very visualness of the novel which gets played down. Take the scenes with animals: Zola, who was so brutal about people, showed tender, solicitous regard for animals (he had had several beloved pets of his own); surely no one who has read the book will forget the horrifying vividness with which Zola describes the sheer terror of the horses who are forced underground for their subterranean drudgery, never to see light again.

Zola would never again reach such heights, though he continued to make terrific amounts of money off his books. And when the Rougon-Macquart series was finished, the indefatigable Zola went on to

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write two more, shorter series—but by all accounts, he was performing in a fashion more dutiful than inspired. He seemed to be haunted by the emptiness of being without a project, one more cycle for which he could keep collecting his dossier of facts, which were then to be transmuted by the alchemy of his intuition. But, of course, he was to have one more grand moment—his defense of Captain Dreyfus. The story is too well-worn to recount here, though Brown crisply retells it. Perhaps what is most interestingly brought out from the long view afforded by Brown's narrative is the relative consistency of Zola's political commitments—which were to a kind of moderate republicanism, a position that was always being jostled by the *gauchistes*. This points up the failure of English-style reformist liberalism to attach itself to any stable party platform in late-nineteenth-century France—Zola might have been more at home in such a milieu. Alas, such was not the case, as he found himself embattled—to be sure, a situation he usually relished—as he was attacked by nationalists from both Left and Right.

In the polarized climate of opinion at the time of his death, it is unlikely that in the end either his friends or his enemies really understood him. Workers, including coal miners, proudly marched in his funeral procession, shouting "Germinal!" to remind all that Zola was the one who put their cause on the map—though Zola was far from being a revolutionary. And such was the hatred he inspired among the anti-Dreyfusards that when his ceremonial cortège approached the Pantheon, bringing him to his final resting place, crowds of goons came to spit on the body, trying to block Zola's entry into a symbolic bastion of the fatherland. (Dreyfus himself, who was in attendance, was shot, though it was only a flesh wound.) It is even quite possible that Zola was murdered by one or two of these zealots; a deathbed confession was unearthed in 1953, stating that a couple of roughnecks stopped up the chimney flue of Zola's home, causing his death by carbon monoxide poisoning. At least the death itself was peaceful and presumably painless—probably the quietest moment of his life.

Friends & founders

James Morton Smith, editor
The Republic of Letters:
The Correspondence between
Thomas Jefferson and James Madison,
1776–1826. In three volumes.
Norton, 2,273 pages, $150 the boxed set

reviewed by Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr.

The publication of the Jefferson–Madison correspondence is an event, for all who take a serious interest in American politics, that should have happened a long time ago. The letters have been available in older, separate editions of the works of the two founders, and also in the newer, critical editions of their "papers," still far from completion, which are turned out, one volume at a time, with such agonizing slowness as to suggest an involuntary retentiveness in the editors. But here, suddenly, are three beautiful volumes all at once, and of the whole correspondence. They are a credit to both editor and publisher.

James Morton Smith, the editor, helped produce *The Adams–Jefferson Letters* (edited by Lester J. Cappon and published in 1959), an exchange remarkable for its charm and detachment. Now he gives us Jefferson's correspondence with Madison, an even more valuable resource, with just as much philosophy but also full of the business at hand and the confidences necessary for common action. The letters are organized chronologically into chapters, each beginning with an introduction by Smith that provides the context of the period (usually a year or two, depending on the frequency of the exchange) and tells the reader about the latest historical scholarship. The notes are useful and admirably unintrusive, the bibliography is informative, the index is of uncommon quality. Altogether, these are books

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to own and to master. Every current political debate can be illuminated, directly or indirectly, by what these two men once said to each other.

Indeed, it is with some awe that any American enters upon a correspondence between the author of the Declaration of Independence and the Father of the Constitution. Here are the two main documents in American politics joined together in a lifelong friendship of the two men responsible for them. The Adams–Jefferson letters were so captivating because they were exchanged between two fellow revolutionaries who became political adversaries, and all the more so because Jefferson was vice president under President Adams. It was interesting to see how far mutual esteem could extend despite political disagreement and how much one party could concede to the other outside public view. It was to Adams that Jefferson made the best statement of his undemocratic support for a "natural aristocracy" of talents. But Jefferson's friendship with Madison was political and partisan. They were not merely in the same party, they formed it together—the first American political party. Curiously, Madison, though a friend of Jefferson, never had any liking for Jefferson's friend John Adams. In friendship, things equal to the same thing are not necessarily equal to each other.

What is a political friendship? That is a question prompted by this collection, and one not easy to answer. A political friendship is not merely a sharing of values, as is implied by the somewhat misleading title the editor has given to the work, *The Republic of Letters*. That term usually applies to the association of men of letters in the Enlightenment that transcended national boundaries and that extended, or pretended to extend, beyond the West to the East (as, for example, in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*). They were called *philosophes* but were closer to "intellectuals" in today's sense of the word than to true philosophers. Their association was among readers, or potential friends—not actual friends.

Although the *philosophes* certainly had a common political goal of revolutionizing the old regime of monarchy and the Church, they were the sort of abstract ideologues that Madison and Jefferson were precisely not. Madison and especially Jefferson were readers of the *philosophes*, and Jefferson while in Paris sought them out. But the two Americans were not the cosmopolitan "citizens" of the Republic of Letters whom Tocqueville found responsible for the demise of the old regime because of their theoretical disdain for political practice as it is found. Jefferson and especially Madison spent their lives in the founding and maintenance of a practicable republic in a particular territory for which compromise was essential, consent was sought, and necessary irrationalities accepted. The republic they made was based on the consent of the people, not on rational demonstration; so their association was in getting the people to agree on what they proposed as right, and their friendship was in political accomplishment.

In actual effect, membership in the Republic of Letters came down to support for the French Revolution against the British, who defended the old regime. That choice, made by both Jefferson and Madison, was easy for any American who had fought the British and who wanted others to have the same liberty as Americans. But there were limits to their partiality for France. During the XYZ affair in 1798, Talleyrand's agents, Jefferson said to Madison, were so far mistaken about American Republicans "as to presume an attachment to France and hatred to the Federal party, and not love of their country, to be their first passion." And in 1803 he warned that "the day that France takes possession of New Orleans . . . we must marry ourselves to the British fleet and nation." Such sentiments, though very republican, do not belong in the Republic of Letters.

What was it, then, that made Madison and Jefferson friends? If directed to Madison, the question is especially difficult. His lifetime

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of accomplishment with Jefferson has been called "the great collaboration," and it certainly was—from the Virginia legislature in 1776 to the Revolutionary War, the Bill of Rights, the opposition to Hamilton and the organization of the Republican Party in the 1790s, Jefferson's presidency, and the founding of the University of Virginia in 1818–19. Yet to us, his differences with Jefferson appear to run deep, at least as deep as those with Hamilton. He had also collaborated with Hamilton at the Constitutional Convention and of course he wrote the semi-official commentary on the Constitution, *The Federalist*, in apparent concord with Hamilton, as part of the battle for ratification that they fought together. Madison was an original Federalist no less than Washington or Hamilton. Yet he broke with Hamilton, and thus with Washington, soon after on the issues of assuming the public debt, founding the Bank of the United States, and the power of the executive to proclaim neutrality in a war between Britain and France. So disturbed was he at Hamilton's program of increasing national and executive power that he helped found the first party in the new republic to defeat it. In a time when party divisions were not held respectable, this was a serious step.

We should not consider the conflict with Hamilton a small matter merely because we have now all gone so far toward—and beyond—Hamilton's side. Big Government is still an issue, probably *the* issue, today. Nor should we simply accept Hamilton's complaint in 1792 that Madison's dislike was personal and not based on "a sincere difference of opinion" because a "very material *change* took place" in his thinking. Madison went with his fellow-Virginian Jefferson, that is true—but against another fellow-Virginian, George Washington. Why did he do this?

Here are the disagreements Madison had with Jefferson, seemingly as profound as this one with Hamilton, that emerge from their letters. They disagreed over Shays' Rebellion in 1786, which Madison labeled treason and regarding which Jefferson made his famous remark defending "a little rebellion now and then" to enliven a republic. They disagreed over the Constitution, which Jefferson, watching from afar, declared was being made by an "assembly of demigods." But when confronted with the result, Jefferson was at first staggered at the extent of the powers granted to the new government, and only the brilliant persuasions of Madison brought him around to acceptance. Even so, he does not seem to have appreciated the main innovations of the Constitution, especially his demigod friend Madison's new argument for saving a republic by extending the sphere, an argument Madison's letters repeat from the presentation in *Federalist 10*. Jefferson further disagreed with Madison over the Bill of Rights, which Madison, while agreeing with Hamilton in *Federalist 84* that the Constitution itself was a Bill of Rights, thought necessary mainly as a means of mollifying opponents of the Constitution. For Madison, the danger was not so much from the structure of government, against which the Bill of Rights was directed, as from "the majority of the Community." So Madison told his friend with words of wisdom: "Wherever the real power in the government lies [i.e., in the majority], there is the danger of oppression."

The two friends disagreed just as profoundly over "the question whether one generation of men has a right to bind another"—which Jefferson raised and answered in the negative. In reply, Madison pointed out that the dead leave improvements as well as debts for future generations. No doubt he had in mind the Constitution itself, which in *Federalist 49*, speaking against a related proposal of Jefferson's, he said was in need of the veneration bestowed by time. With his sublime prudence, he adds that Jefferson's principle would be useful "as a salutary curb on the living generation from imposing unjust or unnecessary burdens on their successors"—precisely the opposite of the liberating effect intended by Jefferson! And Madison concludes that "our hemisphere must be still more enlightened before

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many of the sublime truths which are seen thro' the medium of Philosophy, become visible to the naked eye of the ordinary Politician." No doubt, in a republic as informed by philosophy as ours, we shall always need statesmen like Madison with the understanding and the ability to push philosophy beyond the horizon of the ordinary politician.

To this list one could add the difference over the Virginia and Kentucky resolutions, protests against the Alien and Sedition acts in which Jefferson went to the fateful extreme of allowing for secession and Madison wanted to keep within constitutional bounds. In sum, Jefferson and Madison differed over nothing less than the nature of a constitution and the character of the American republic. But don't we all? What are such trifles between friends!

It would not be right to stop without mentioning a few of the many morsels to be found with the major sustenance in these volumes. We are not surprised that both statesmen loved "close reading" throughout their lives, but it is wonderful that Madison in a certain case feared "the danger of turning the controversy too much into the wilderness of books." Nonetheless he kept watch over Jefferson's nephew's reading of the classics at the College of William and Mary. His future wife Dolley referred to him as "the great little Madison." In a mishap that occurred while he was courting Maria Cosway in Paris, Jefferson sprained his wrist—and thereupon learned to write with his left hand. There too he met "a very sensible man, a pure theorist, of the sect called the oeconomists." To take note of meeting an economist is the very essence of naïveté, but so too, in a nobler sense, is Jefferson's concern for architecture: "How is a taste in this beautiful art to be formed in our countrymen, unless we avail ourselves of every occasion when public buildings are to be erected, of presenting to them models for their study and imitation?" On certain occasions and in certain men, politics is beautiful.

Harry, Teddy & Whit

Thomas Griffith Harry & Teddy: The Turbulent Friendship of Press Lord Henry R. Luce & His Favorite Reporter, Theodore H. White. Random House, 340 pages, $24

reviewed by Terry Teachout

Once upon a time, Theodore White, author of the *Making of the President* series and celebrity journalist par excellence, was a hungry young reporter sniffing around for a scoop and a patron. He found the first in China and the second in Henry Luce, editor and publisher of *Time*, who made White a star before breaking with him over the magazine's policy toward Chiang Kai-shek. All this is well known to amateur historians of American journalism, but it still makes for a good story, especially when recounted by one who knew the principals. Thomas Griffith, an old Luce hand who was assistant managing editor of *Time* and, later, editor of *Life*, has chosen to occupy himself in retirement by telling the tale of how Harry and Teddy came to blows over Chinese Communism. Appropriately enough, he has told it in something not far removed from old-fashioned *Time*style, and the results, if not exactly elegant, are lively, readable, and—most important—reliable.

Fresh out of Harvard, White came to China in 1938 equipped with a degree in China studies and a burning desire to become famous. He found a job working in Chiang Kai-shek's propaganda office; a few weeks later, he met John Hersey, who was looking for a Chungking stringer for *Time*. White accepted the assignment, made a splash, quit his day job, and became the magazine's full-time roving correspondent in Southeast Asia. He met Luce in 1941, and the two men hit it off at once, in large part because Luce's emotional ties to China, which included outright hero worship of Chiang Kai-shek, meshed well with White's own passion for a country he idealized with comparable fervor.

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Chiang was the worm in the rose. White later described him as "a man I learned first to respect and admire, then to pity, then to despise." In fact, White filed more than a few prewar stories about Chiang and his wife that must have caused him plenty of blushes later on, assuming that journalists are capable of being embarrassed by the excesses of their youth. ("It would be impossible to exaggerate her loveliness," White wrote of Madame Chiang in 1941. "No photograph does her justice because her beauty—aside from perfection of feature, a complexion that puts cosmetics to shame, and about the best figure in Free Asia—is electric, incandescent and internal.") Luce had a similar crush on China's first couple, but never lost it; White found someone newer and more progressive to love.

In 1942, Lt. Gen. Joseph Stilwell, the commander of Allied forces in the China-Burma-India theater, was appointed chief of staff of Chiang Kai-shek's armies. Stilwell loathed Chiang ("The trouble in China," he told White, "is simple: We are allied to an ignorant, illiterate, superstitious, peasant son of a bitch") and made the mistake in the fall of 1944 of breaking openly with the Generalissimo, who thereupon contrived to have him relieved. White, previously shocked into disillusionment by Chiang's apparent indifference to a 1943 famine, sided with Stilwell and filed a *Time* cover story saying so.

White then flew to Yenan to cover the Chinese Communists, in the process developing a crush on them even more extreme than the one he had had on Chiang Kai-shek: "Those of us who have been so criticized for romanticizing the Chinese Communists can claim forgiveness for those weeks in Yenan in October and November; Chinese Communists were different then; we were not duped." Yet another dispatch was cabled to New York, this one as starry-eyed over Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai as its predecessor had been contemptuous of Chiang.

But White was in for a surprise when he returned to Chungking: *Time* had edited his cover story in such a way as to invert its meaning, removing or diluting most of his criticisms of the Chiang regime. This kind of transmogrification was far from uncommon at *Time*, whose correspondents sent in reportage which was rewritten by the magazine's New York–based editors, and would doubtless have been forgotten long ago were it not for the fact that the foreign editor of *Time*, whose job included handling Theodore White's copy, was a rumpled, anxiety-prone ex-Communist named Whittaker Chambers.

"*Time* gives both sides," Henry Luce and cofounder Briton Hadden wrote in the magazine's prospectus, "but clearly indicates which side it believes to have the stronger position." The catch was that *Time* refused to acknowledge its bias was bias. "[T]his magazine," the prospectus continued, "is not founded to promulgate prejudices, liberal or conservative. 'To keep men well-informed' —that, first and last, is the only ax this magazine has to grind." In order to preserve the appearance of fairmindedness, the magazine expressed its opinions not by conventional editorializing but by slanting its news stories in a hundred ways, some subtle and some crass: stiletto-sharp headlines, cyanide-tipped adjectives, bad-guy photographs.

The fact that Luce was a staunch Republican means that reading a fifty-year-old copy of *Time* can be a jolting experience, not unlike watching an "alternate-world" science-fiction movie in which *The New York Times* is conservative. It also explains the intensity with which liberals of the Thirties and Forties hated Luce, for *Time* was the most powerful and influential magazine of its day. Not a few of these liberals, as it happened, worked for Luce. ("For some goddamn reason," he famously complained, "Republicans can't write.") Take a hundred good liberal writers, put them all together in a high-rise office building, pay them large salaries to help produce a slickly written pro-Republican newsmagazine, and you get *Time* circa 1944, a seething mass of self-hatred in search of a scapegoat.

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Enter Whittaker Chambers. A few months after breaking with the Communist Party in 1938, Chambers was hired as a book reviewer for *Time*. He soon became one of Luce's most trusted allies, thereby antagonizing virtually every *Time* editor and writer to his left (meaning most of the staff). When Chambers was named foreign editor of *Time* in 1944, the magazine underwent an internal convulsion of whose larger significance he had no doubt. "It was," he wrote in *Witness*, his 1952 memoir, "a struggle to decide whether a million Americans more or less were going to be given the facts about Soviet aggression, or whether those facts were going to be suppressed, distorted, sugared or perverted into the exact opposite of their true meaning."

Chambers solved this problem by rewriting most of the copy that passed through his hands to make it accord with his anti-Communist convictions. This whipped *Time*'s foreign correspondents into a frenzy, none more so than Theodore White, who believed to the end of his life that Chambers's editing of his Stilwell story turned it into "a lie, an entirely dishonorable story."[1] But Luce, who shared Chambers's unblinkered opinion of the Soviet Union and its postwar intentions, backed him to the hilt in his editing of *Time*'s "Foreign News" section and refused to allow White to continue writing about Chinese politics for *Time*.

After the war, White took a six-month leave of absence and co-wrote *Thunder Out of China*, an attack on the Chiang regime. Upon returning to *Time* in 1946, he was nominated for the job of Moscow bureau chief, but the appointment never came off: Luce, who had read *Thunder Out of China*, vetoed the promotion and fired his old protégé. White spent the next fifteen years laboring as a free-lance writer before striking gold with *The Making of the President 1960*; Chambers's career at *Time* ended in 1948 when he told the House Un-American Activities Committee that he had been the courier for a Soviet spy ring whose members included Alger Hiss, and he never again wrote regularly for a mass audience.

The story of Harry, Teddy, and Whit is one guaranteed to raise the hackles of any liberal with a long memory; the impressive thing about *Harry & Teddy* is that Thomas Griffith has told it in an even-handed way. His own liberal sympathies are never in doubt, but he is clearly determined to be fair to all the parties involved, even Chambers.[2] Those familiar with the facts in the case of Teddy White *v.* Time Inc. will find no selective omissions or false emphases, and Griffith's final verdict seems to me a fair one: "When Teddy at the age of sixty-three wrote in his autobiography, 'I still insist, and know, that I was right and [Luce] was wrong in telling the story of China,' he was right in talking about the period when he was on the scene, reporting the collapse of Chiang Kai-shek's regime. Luce was right in insisting that if the Communists came to power things would get worse."

All this notwithstanding, Thomas Griffith still believes Theodore White was a better journalist than Whittaker Chambers: "With his apocalyptic vision, [Chambers] regarded the week's news—the downfall of this po-

1 Chambers's view of the matter can be found in *Witness*, in which he lumped White with a group of *Time* correspondents who "continued to feed out news from the viewpoint that the Soviet Union is a benevolent democracy of unaggressive intent, or that the Chinese Communists are 'agrarian reformers.'"

2 As national-affairs editor of *Time*, Griffith directed the magazine's coverage of the Hiss case, and his account of the experience, though brief, is interesting: "As the story unfolded, the writers on my staff—several of them hostile to Chambers, another, Duncan Norton-Taylor, his friend—were equally determined to tell a complicated story straight. We did so without any interference from Harry Luce. In the end, I think, all of us who handled the story were convinced that Hiss was guilty. . . . For years afterward I read numerous articles and books about the case and never found a reason to reverse a conclusion I had taken no pleasure in reaching."

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litical party or that—as trivial events, and those who reported them as superficial journalists." I suspect this says more about the essentially superficial character of weekly journalism than it does about Chambers's integrity, much less his understanding of the nature of Communism. ("An editor's job," Henry Luce once said, "is to stay ahead of his readers by three weeks, not ten years.") Even White himself, who turned increasingly conservative in his later years, came at the end of his life to question the wisdom of his reporting on the Chinese Communists:

> We were all very young men, ignorant men, unskilled men. China was a mystery to all of us, as it remains to this day a mystery to the most learned scholars. We never knew who was doing what to whom or why. We could not penetrate Chinese politics. We lived on the slope of a volcano; we could see its steaming, record an eruption now and then, knew the landscape was heaving, and all of us sensed that this volcano would blow its top.

It is better to admit mistakes than not, but it is best of all to have been right in the first place. Writing in *In Search of History*, his 1978 autobiography, Theodore White confessed that the three men in his life "in whose presence I had near total suspension of disbelief or questioning judgment" were Joseph Stilwell, Chou En-lai, and John Kennedy. Even for a superficial celebrity journalist, that's a pretty lousy batting average.

The poem as prayer

James Boyd White
"This Book of Starres":
Learning to Read George Herbert.
University of Michigan Press,
292 pages, $37.50

reviewed by Paul Dean

"Thus he lived, and thus he died like a saint, unspotted of the world, full of alms-deeds, full of humility, and all the examples of a virtuous life." So Izaak Walton concluded his biographical sketch of Herbert, published in 1670, thirty-seven years after the poet's death. Professor White tells us that he first encountered Herbert's work when a pupil at Groton School, a high-minded establishment which inculcated genteel culture along English lines. Walton's hagiographical image of Herbert seemed entirely appropriate in such an atmosphere. But Professor White soon discovered that there is another Herbert, the one who sent the manuscript of his poems to Nicholas Ferrar with the words, "Tell him he shall find in it a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master"; the Herbert brilliantly characterized by Seamus Heaney, in his inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1989, as a poet whose "antithetical pairings can be felt as emotional dilemmas as well as doctrinal cruxes, and can be experienced as the hinges and reflexes of awakened language." It is this second Herbert who forms the principal subject of Professor White's book.

Herbert's distinctive quality may be grasped by considering the following (incomplete) quotation:

> No more, I cried, shall grief be mine,
> I will throw off the load;
> No longer weep, and sigh, and pine
> To find an absent God.
>
> Free as the Muse, my wishes move,
> Through Nature's wilds they roam:
> Loose as the wind, ye wanderers, rove,
> And bring me pleasure home!
>
> Still shall I urge, with endless toil,
> Yet not obtain my suit?
> Still shall I plant th' ungrateful soil,
> Yet never taste the fruit?
>
> Not so, my heart!—

It is at this point that we realize we are reading an astonishingly flat paraphrase of one of Herbert's most intensely dramatic

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poems, "The Collar":

I struck the board, and cry'd, No more.
I will abroad.
What? Shall I ever sigh and pine?
My lines and life are free; free as the rode,
Loose as the winde, as large as store.
Shall I be still in suit?
Have I no harvest but a thorn
To let me bloud, and not restore
What I have lost with cordiall fruit?
Sure there was wine
Before my sighs did drie it: there was corn
Before my tears did drown it.
Is the yeare onely lost to me?
Have I no bayes to crown it?
No flowers, no garlands gay? all blasted?
All wasted?
Not so, my heart . . .

The paraphrase (which White quotes) empties Herbert's poem of all its rhythmical tension, its energetic mimesis of speech and thoughts thrashing wildly around, replacing this with a beat of metronomic monotony. The wonderful interplay of tones—exasperation, ironical self-criticism, self-pity, swaggering boastfulness, regret for wasted time—are ironed out at the behest of a decorum of irreproachable insipidity. The author of this sanitized version was John Wesley.

That Herbert is at his most compelling when rhythmically engaged as here, not when playing with anagrams and puns, is a major contention of Professor White's, and it is easy enough to find lines that sound startlingly modern in that respect:

O that thou shouldst give dust a tongue
To crie to thee,
And then not heare it crying!
("Deniall")

—or this, which Hopkins surely echoes in "Thou art indeed just, Lord":

All things are busie; onely I
Neither bring hony with the bees,
Nor flowres to make that, nor the husbandrie
To water these.
I am no link of thy great chain,
But all my companie is a weed.
("Employment (I)")

Hopkins was engaged in "wrestling with (my God!) my God": so is Herbert, and for much the same reasons. Like Hopkins, he was a proud, fastidious man of high culture, with a distinguished university career, who felt the call to priesthood as something to which he was compelled to submit, rather than something which he embraced joyfully: like Hopkins also, he had to direct an iron willpower against itself, in order to make it bend to an unignorable summons.

Professor White's book begins with admirable "slow reading" discussions of ten poems, establishing his main lines of argument: that Herbert's poetry is built on contradictions, that it is a form of prayer which aims at the impossible goal of talking about the ineffable, that it is a search for the authenticity of the self, and that it is highly self-conscious about language. Throughout the book he is excellent on this last topic, remarking that "for Herbert poetry is a kind of thought . . . a form of life," that while it is prayer, "the life is in the movement, not the prayer itself," and that since "to speak a language is in an important sense to believe it," the prayer-poem is a credal statement, just as Herbert's book *The Temple* is both a collection of poems and a single linguistic edifice. In the second part of his book, Professor White works through *The Temple* more systematically, showing how the placing of individual poems in the sequence is important for the light they cast on one another, the dialectic that is set up between them, their contribution to an evolving argument that is no less than the whole book.

Here, however, difficulties begin. *The Temple* is divided into three sections, "The Church-Porch," "The Church," and "The Church Militant." Professor White gives scant attention to the first—which he finds boring and "false to one's experiences of moral life"—and none at all to the third, which he considers dogmatic rather than creative-exploratory. For the same reason he

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is not interested in the prose work *A Priest to the Temple*, which he salutes as "great" and then ignores. He dislikes what he takes to be a sententious streak in Herbert, and believes that Herbert disliked it too. I am not so sure; it is no part of a priest's duty to collect proverbs, but Herbert had amassed over a thousand before he died, and surely he would not have bothered if he did not find the occupation congenial. There is a riddling quality to his mind, which comes out in the anagrams Professor White (rightly) finds tedious; it is what connects him with medieval English poetry, whose traditions underlie his greatest poem, "The Sacrifice." Professor White is entitled to be selective, but the selectivity works against his claims for the coherence of *The Temple*. Apart from this there is a contradiction in arguing for both discreteness and coherence in the collection, since each poem, however highly wrought, is no more than a fragment of the whole.

Professor White spends much time tracing "developments" in Herbert's views as poem modifies poem, yet since we cannot date the individual poems, and have no reason to suppose that they are printed in the order in which they were written, such development, which he calls a "struggle towards clarification," can be *rhetorical* only, a matter of dramatic art. Herbert's debt to Elizabethan/Jacobean drama is a standard critical point; without *King Lear*, for example, the ending of "The Thanksgiving" might have been very different:

> Then for thy passion—I will do for that—
> Alas, my God, I know not what.

Professor White claims that Herbert's "is a mind like Shakespeare's, that can hardly say anything at all without instantly affirming its opposite." Yet the comparison will not do. *The Temple*, a deliberate design, moves toward a foreknown conclusion, the poem "Love (III)," one of Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Five Mystical Songs*, which reveal musically an insight into the hidden life of Herbert that Professor White, with his emphasis on Herbert's "toughness," somehow misses:

> You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:
> So I did sit and eat.

It is the Holy Communion, of course: the poet's struggles have led him to this simple passive acceptance of a gift his pride cannot refuse, the self-offering of the Son of God. There is no such point of resolution in the works of Shakespeare, for all their impression of being the products of a single mind. In the end, Herbert is content; it was Shakespeare for whom, in the words of Henry Vaughan's "Man," "God order'd motion, but ordain'd no rest." Thus I am not happy with Professor White's view of the structure of *The Temple*. At one point he comments that the unity of the poems is "less like an order that marches in one direction in a straight line than a sequence like that of dreams": but dreams do not have the coherence which he attributes to the book.

I am further troubled by his later echoing of the analogy when he addresses the problem of the remoteness of Herbert's worldview from ours. He rightly enough insists that we must suspend (theological) disbelief but adds, "In reading Herbert this language makes sense; in the world in which we awake, after doing so, for most of us, it does not." If we have to "awake" from reading the poems then we have not been reading them at all, but misappropriating them for the purposes of daydreaming. This leads to the general question of how Herbert is to be made appealing to an untheological age. Professor White, who is a scrupulous man, is aware that he is engaged in an uphill task. To an English reader he seems excessively nervous about Herbert's doctrinal convictions and too eager to suggest that, really, they can be accommodated to a postmodernist pluralism. Thus he praises the dramatic quality of the interplay of voices in Herbert's poems, comparing him to Frost and remarking that he "has nothing to learn from postmodern critics about the instabil-

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ities either of language or of the self." The fact is that when Professor White rejects this or that poem as voicing an authoritarian or dogmatic position which, he assures us, Herbert meant us to reject, he is on flimsy ground. Admittedly things have changed in England now, but Anglican orthodoxy in the seventeenth century involved the enunciation of doctrines which, amazingly enough, people were expected to accept.[1] Professor White says excellently that Herbert does not oppose belief to disbelief —"nothing that easy"—but that "he believes, and shows us what that means." Yet he elsewhere denies that we can meaningfully ascribe beliefs to Herbert or read his poems as the expression of theological propositions, because "disbelief would have been as impossible for him as many people find belief to be in our own age." Herbert, we may grant, could never have been an atheist, but it seems extraordinary to suppose that he could not have doubted, when his poems constantly express doubts. What *would* have been impossible for him is the kind of vaporing represented by Professor White's assertion that "out of the materials we are given by our culture, each of us . . . imagines his or her God—or the universe without a God—and we are in part responsible for what we create." When White projects his own latitudinarianism onto Herbert, however kindly-motivated he may be, he falsifies on a massive scale. Sometimes this leads to mistaken interpretations of the poems, as when he considers God's refusal, in "The Pulley," to grant Man rest because then "He would adore my gifts instead of me." White becomes almost hysterical here, finding God's logic "shocking" because "the desire to be adored seems selfish, vain, and tyrannical," the withholding of rest the product of "an element of sadism"! But Herbert is simply pointing out that God's concern is to direct human love away from things temporal to things eternal in a way which will lead to the soul's happiness. God, Herbert assumes, can have no "desire to be adored" because he does not need it: but human beings need an object of adoration, and it is vital that this should be the right one.

Similarly with Herbert the postmodernist. Whatever the narrowly-read may believe, our century did not discover the view that language is not a straightforward reflection of the external world. Herbert, to be sure, would have differed from the postmodernist in believing that there *was* an external world —in fact, the possession of a religious belief exempts one from being a postmodernist. Professor White makes a serious misunderstanding, maintaining that Herbert's questions about his culture could only be asked from within it, when he says that to resolve his perplexities Herbert would have had to "establish a self external to his language"—the implication being that this is impossible. But, of course, that is exactly what religious faith does. Professor White falls victim to the logocentric fallacy, forgetting that the Logos is not only a word but a mode of being ("The Word was made flesh"). Herbert's magnificent sonnet "Prayer (1)" piles up metaphor after dazzling metaphor to express what prayer is, only in the last two words to throw them all away and define it simply as "something understood." In rejecting metaphor in favor of intellection Herbert asserts that it is, indeed, possible to transcend one's language.[2]

My reservations about Professor White's cultural assumptions and large-scale procedure are not meant to detract from the insights he provides into individual poems: there are few cases where I feel he has gone badly wrong. The flaws in his book stem from the difficulty, which he is too honest not to feel, of advocating a religious poet to

1 On the day I write, a Church of England priest has been dismissed from his parish by the Bishop of Chichester for stating that he does not believe in God. The Bishop has been condemned by theologians up and down the country!

2 Herbert's understanding of prayer is well discussed in Terry G. Sherwood's book *Herbert's Prayerful Art* (Toronto, 1990), which Professor White does not mention in his bibliography.

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a world which has forgotten what religion is. *"This Book of Starres"* is a praiseworthy attempt to restore Herbert to general circulation. It deserves to succeed, and to prove the truth of Herbert's dictum in "The Church-Porch": "A verse may finde him, who a sermon flies."

Shorter notices

Anthony Burgess
A Dead Man in Deptford.
Carroll & Graf, 272 pages, $21

Novelizing the lives of famous artists is probably not a good idea. For every Hermann Broch, this genre throws up a thousand Irving Stones. The late Anthony Burgess was fond of the enterprise, doing the life of Shakespeare (*Nothing Like the Sun*), of, in light disguise, Somerset Maugham (*Earthly Powers*), and in this, his final novel, of Christopher Marlowe. Burgess may have thought he was bringing a Joycean richness to a pop genre, but he was really just Irving Stone with airs.

The son of a Canterbury shoemaker, Kit Marlowe (1564–1593) went to Cambridge but headed for London in 1587 to scribble for the theater. We pick him up there; the story is told (when Burgess remembers) by an anonymous young actor in Burbage's troupe who acts in the old-fashioned *melos* of Kyd and in the new-fangled *melos* of Kit and is the occasional object of Kit's lust. Kit has a dicey rep about town—his plays are scandalous enough but he gets drunk in the Unicorn and spouts shocking atheism and buggery. Kit was "known about the town, pointed at as one that would raise the devil [cf. *Doctor Faustus*] with Latin, and with Greek call back Helen of Troy from the dead [ditto]."

But what gives Kit even more best-seller cachet than diabolism or buggery is espionage. Yes, reader, he was a spy. And so, relying heavily on Charles Nicholl's *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe* for fact and on le Carré for atmosphere, Burgess tries to imagine the whole sordid story. At Cambridge, Kit did a chance favor for aristocratic poetaster Tom Watson, who later introduced Marlowe to Elizabethan spymaster Sir Francis Walsingham. Sir Francis forcibly enlists a somewhat reluctant Kit into the service: he's off to the Catholic seminary at Rheims, where he pretends to be a Catholic to get (or manufacture) the goods on various priests for plotting to kill Elizabeth and install Mary Queen of Scots. Kit engages in anguished midnight colloquies with a God he doesn't believe in, and, back in London, is made to watch the public disembowelling of the men he'd fingered. His stomach is upset.

Kit has a busy life in rollicking London. There's his poetry ("Good bloody stuff here," says one admirer) and there's handsome, young Tom Walsingham, the footloose cousin of Sir Francis. "He saw Kit. Kit saw him. Nay, it was more than pure seeing. It was Jove's bolt. It was, to borrow from the papists, the bell of the consecration." Not to mention New York in June and a Gershwin tune. Soon they're at it, and Burgess/the narrator for some reason slips into a sort of macaronic of Latin and English: "Oscula, oscula, engagement of light beards and oscula, oscula elsewhere, amplexus, complexus . . ." Doing this once too often, in Kit's parents' house in Canterbury, they get discovered by Kit's idiot sister and ejected by Dad: "Shame shame shame rustled in the leaves . . ."

By May of 1593, Sir Francis is dead. Kit has lost his protector but not his recklessness: he's now involved with an occultist coven influenced by Giordano Bruno and meeting at the house of Sir Walter Raleigh. Summoned to the Privy Council—the Archbishop of Canterbury, Essex (Raleigh's great foe), and the new spymaster, Sir Robert Cecil—to answer for all this, Kit responds flippantly and rides off to the country house of (now) Sir Thomas Walsingham. Sir Tom has himself been a spy, but is now seeking respectability; he coldly advises Kit to sail from Deptford, saying: "You are expert in theology. You can lecture on divinity

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abroad." Sir Tom drags Kit to witness another execution, this time of a Puritan pamphleteer; again, the half-religious, half-blasphemous poet is disgusted. Next day, at Deptford, Kit is stabbed by Tom's sinister, homophobic, Mrs. Danvers-like factotum, Ingram Frizer. A lover's kissoff or a political assassination? We'll never know, as Burgess, stepping forward in his own voice on the last page, admits.

But Burgess strongly hints at the former. Indeed, he seems set on saving Marlowe from his own reputation: he was no atheist, but a tormented agnostic; no promiscuous pederast, but a faithful lover of a peer; no sadistic betrayer, but a guilty thing trying to come in out of the cold. Not the roaring boy of legend, but a fucked-up kid—more James Dean, in a word, than Kim Philby. Not that it matters, for it's just a question of one cliché for another. In old Hollywood artist-biographies, there's often a big moment when a great inspiration is sparked by something trivial; here, Marlowe thinks of his greatest line—"Christ's blood streams in the firmament"—whilst emptying a chamber pot. Burgess has painted his pot with learned figures, but the content's the same.

—Donald Lyons

Theodore & Renée Weiss, editors
Quarterly Review of Literature
50th Anniversary Anthology.
Quarterly Review of Literature
(26 Haslet Avenue, Princeton, N.J. 08540),
561 pages, $35; $20 paper

In this age of fly-by-night journals edited by those with fly-by-night taste, it is a pleasure to reflect on the happy history of the *Quarterly Review of Literature*. Founded over half a century ago by Theodore and Renée Weiss, the *QRL*, as it is called by its small but avid readership, has one of the most distinguished rosters of past contributors around. Modernist giants such as Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, and William Carlos Williams—all of whom are represented in this new anniversary anthology—published poems in the pages of the *QRL*, as did notable voices of later generations such as Elizabeth Bishop, Vernon Watkins, Richard Wilbur, Jean Garrigue, David Schubert, Louis Simpson, and Charles Tomlinson—all of whom also have poems here. (Garrigue's "Studies for an Actress" alone is worth the price of the book.)

For many years the *QRL* was a forum for fiction, too, but because the editors felt that poetry had been abandoned by the commercial presses, the decision was made in 1978 to publish only quarterly anthologies of poetry or annual volumes comprising four or more full-length books chosen in open competition. The new anthology is in two sections, "New Poems by *QRL*'s Poetry Book Winners" and "Poetry from *QRL*'s Past." Of course the Weisses' decision to place the work of a group of relatively unknown poets next to that of some of the century's masters is something of a gamble. (And the newer poets in the Weisses' anthology *are* unknowns in that many had never published a book before appearing in the *QRL* series.) But the gamble pays off: there is less qualitative difference between the two sections than one might expect. As if to underscore this point about quality—as well as to make a statement about the importance of new voices to any publishing enterprise—the Weisses place the newer poets first and give them twice the space. The stand-outs among the recent *QRL* Book Winners, each of whom is represented by sets of poems rather than one or two stray verses, are David Barton, Bruce Bond, Marguerite Bouvard, and Frederick Feirstein.

In their introduction the Weisses write that "our sharpest insight [after fifty years of publishing] assures us that this moment has been so bewilderingly rich one cannot pretend to be able to embrace it all." True, but few editors have *picked* better over the years: no small feat, when all is said and done. We are lucky to have such a generous sampling of the Weisses' great good taste.

—Robert Richman

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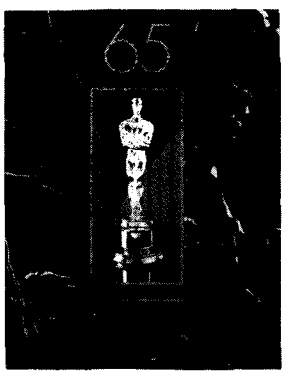

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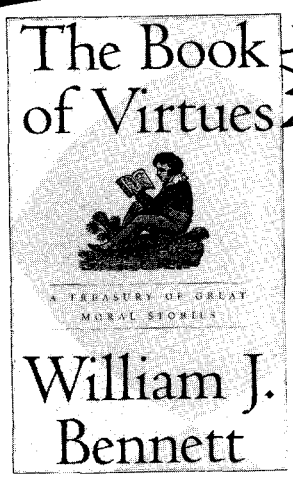

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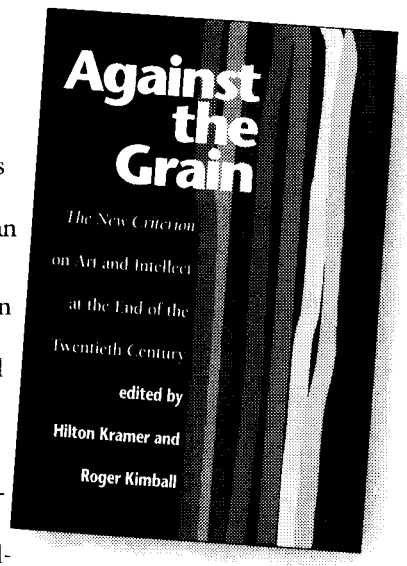

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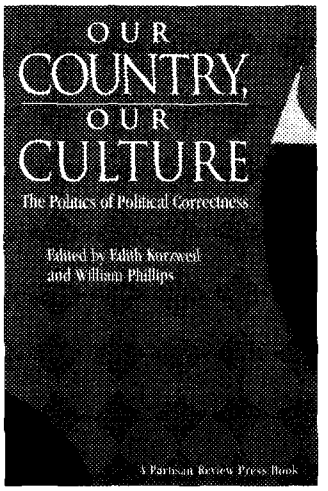

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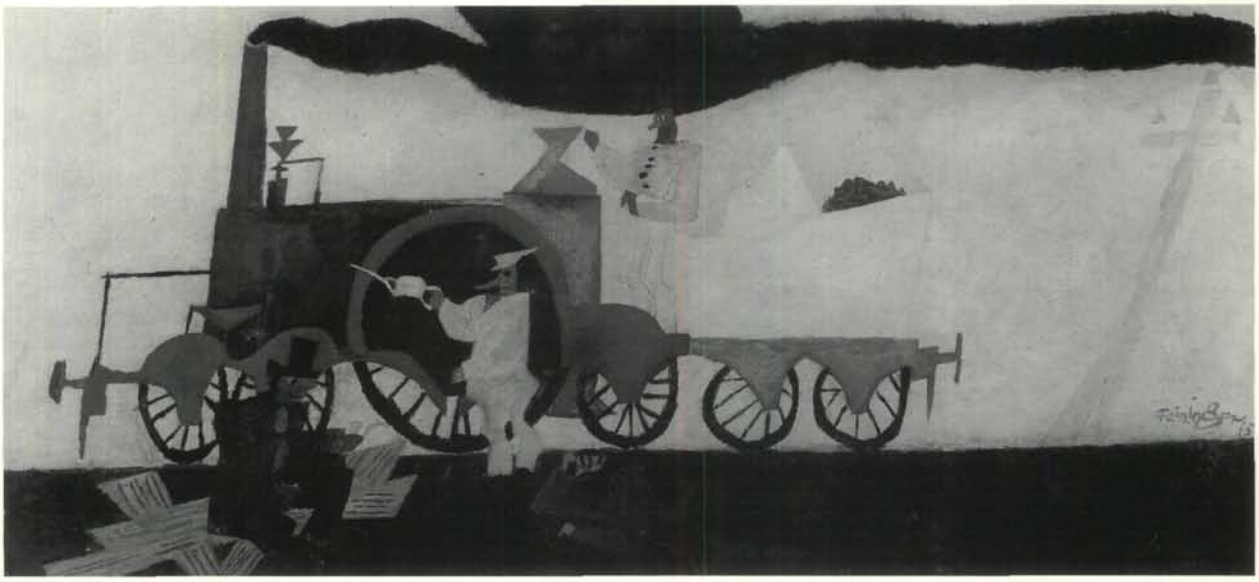

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